

# **Part-time university graduates: Social class, Distance Learning, Employability and Pierre Bourdieu**

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**Thesis submitted for the Award of PhD to Dublin City University (DCU)**

**January 2017**

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## **Declaration of Work**

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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## Research outputs

The following publications have resulted from this research:

### Journal articles

Delaney, L. and Farren, M. (2016): No 'self' left behind? Part-time distance learning university graduates: social class, graduate identity and employability. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open and Distance Learning* Nov 2016, Vol. 31 Issue 3, p. 194-208.

Delaney, L. (2015). Who graduates from Irish distance university education? *European Journal of Open, Distance, and E-learning*. Vol. 18 (1), p. 100-113.

### Conference presentations

Delaney, L. and Farren, M. (forthcoming): *Digital Learning: an important ingredient in equity of access to university*. Australian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE), Adelaide, Australia, 28<sup>th</sup> November 2016.

Delaney, L. (2016). *Using case study methodology to explore the relationship between digital learning and widening university participation*. The Next Generation: Digital Learning Research Symposium 2016. Dublin City University, 1<sup>st</sup> November.

Delaney, L. (2016): *Part-time Higher Education and Graduate Employability: the Class Ceiling* European Access Network Conference, University College Dublin 30<sup>th</sup> May.

Delaney, L., and Farren, M. (2015): *Online distance higher education: Access, graduates and employability*. Paper presented at The Online, Open and Flexible Higher Education Conference, Hagen, FernUniversitat, 29th October.

Delaney, L. (2014). *Who graduates from Irish distance university education?* (pp. 301-310). In A. Moreira Teixeira & A. Szűcs (eds.). Paper in proceedings of the Eight EDEN Research Workshop, Challenges for research into open and distance learning: Doing things better - doing better things. Oxford, United Kingdom, 28th October.

Delaney, L. (2014). *An exploration of student success in online Irish higher education*. Presentation at the Fourth Annual Postgraduate Research Conference in Humanities and Education, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, 25th April.

## **Acknowledgements**

First, I would like to thank my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Margaret Farren for her guidance, support and feedback throughout this PhD process. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Dr. Malcolm Brady, supervisory panel, for his expertise and suggestions. Gratitude also goes to Dr. Yvonne Crotty, validation panel, for her positivity and insightful comments.

Gratitude is also due to my colleagues in the Open Education Unit: Professor Mark Brown, Seamus Fox and Dr. Eamon Costello who facilitated me in every way possible. I have also been aided by other colleagues: James, Paul, Una, Mel, and Shirley with access not only to data but also to their knowledge and wisdom.

To the many students and graduates I met during the course of this study, and throughout the time I have worked in distance education: thank you so much. Without you, the study could not have happened.

To my dear brother and friend, Joe and his wife Catherine, and my other close friends; Clare, Jacky, Breda, and Sheila, who showed a continuous interest in my work, even when they least felt like it, your support was invaluable.

A special acknowledgement to my sons; Cathal, Brian and Eoin, who have been part of this process from the beginning and accepted that their mother was determined to see this project through. Thank you for not being cynical and taking it as seriously as I did, most of the time.

Finally, to my husband and love Tony, who has provided emotional, technical, practical and every other sort of support without knowing where the end of the tunnel might be. I truly could not have done this without you. Love always.

# Table of contents

Declaration of Work .....	ii
Research outputs .....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of contents .....	v
List of Abbreviations .....	x
List of tables .....	xi
List of figures .....	xii
Abstract.....	xiii
<b>1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>14</b>
1.1 Research questions .....	15
1.2 Rationale for this study.....	15
1.3 Research context.....	16
1.3.1 Policy context .....	18
1.4 Theoretical framework .....	22
1.5 Existing research on non-traditional graduates.....	23
1.6 Research methodology .....	24
1.7 Contribution of the thesis .....	25
1.8 Structure of the thesis .....	27
<b>2 The Theoretical Framework: Social Reproduction Theory .....</b>	<b>28</b>
2.1 The concept of class.....	28
2.2 Social class theory .....	30
2.3 Theories of higher education access.....	32
2.4 Pierre Bourdieu and social reproduction theory .....	35
2.5 Bourdieu's conceptual framework.....	36
2.5.1 The concept of <i>habitus</i> .....	37
2.5.2 Critiques of the concept of <i>habitus</i> .....	40
2.5.3 The concept of field .....	42
2.5.4 The concept of <i>capital</i> .....	45
2.5.5 Critics of the concept of <i>capital</i> .....	50
2.6 Bourdieu and distance education .....	52
2.6.1 The democratisation of higher education.....	52
2.6.2 Delayed participation.....	54
2.7 Summary and research issues.....	55
<b>3 Non-traditional graduates - the existing body of knowledge .....</b>	<b>57</b>
3.1 Literature review methodology .....	57
3.2 The pre-participation experience of non-traditional graduates.....	58
3.2.1 Causes or reasons?.....	58

3.2.2	Institutional choice.....	60
3.2.3	Course choice .....	62
3.3	The HE participation experience of non-traditional graduates .....	64
3.3.1	Academic attainment.....	64
3.3.2	Economic capital .....	64
3.3.3	Social capital.....	66
3.3.4	The lived experience of participation .....	68
3.4	The non-traditional graduate experience .....	70
3.4.1	The employability discourse .....	70
3.4.2	Graduate identity.....	72
3.4.3	Transitioning to the labour market.....	74
3.4.4	Non-traditional graduate expectations.....	75
3.4.5	Non-traditional graduate mobility.....	76
3.4.6	Discrimination .....	76
3.4.7	Who employs mature graduates?.....	77
3.4.8	What employers want.....	78
3.4.9	Graduate level employment .....	79
3.4.10	Non-traditional graduate earnings .....	80
3.4.10.1	Institution effect .....	81
3.4.10.2	Social class effect .....	82
3.4.10.3	Age effect .....	83
3.4.11	Social mobility .....	84
3.5	Distance graduates .....	85
3.5.1	The pre-participation experience of distance graduates.....	86
3.5.2	The participation experience of distance graduates .....	87
3.5.3	The post-participation experience of distance graduates .....	88
3.6	Summary .....	91
<b>4</b>	<b>Methodology.....</b>	<b>93</b>
4.1	Aim of the Study .....	93
4.2	Research Philosophies and Methodologies .....	94
4.3	The Question of Paradigm .....	96
4.4	Case study methodology.....	98
4.4.1	Case study definition.....	98
4.4.2	Case study identification.....	99
4.4.3	Case study design.....	100
4.5	Mixed methods .....	102
4.5.1	The Incompatibility Thesis .....	103

4.5.2	Qualitative and quantitative research .....	104
4.6	Research design .....	105
4.6.1	Archival records .....	105
4.6.2	Survey design .....	107
4.6.3	Interview design.....	112
4.6.4	LinkedIn.....	114
4.7	Data collection .....	115
4.7.1	Pilot stage.....	115
4.7.2	Survey stage .....	116
4.7.3	Interview stage.....	118
4.8	Participant selection .....	119
4.8.1	Survey participants .....	119
4.8.2	Interview participants .....	119
4.9	Data analysis .....	124
4.9.1	Archival records analysis.....	124
4.9.2	Survey analysis .....	124
4.9.3	Interview analysis.....	125
4.9.4	Thematic analysis.....	126
4.10	Presentation of the data .....	129
4.11	Ethical considerations .....	129
4.12	Validity and reliability .....	131
4.12.1	Construct validity .....	131
4.12.2	Internal validity .....	131
4.12.3	External validity.....	132
4.12.4	Reliability.....	132
4.13	Limitations of the study .....	133
4.14	Summary .....	133
<b>5</b>	<b>Findings and Discussion .....</b>	<b>134</b>
5.1	The pre-participation phase.....	135
5.1.1	The distance graduate cohort.....	135
5.1.2	General characteristics .....	136
5.1.2.1	Gender .....	136
5.1.2.2	Age .....	137
5.1.2.3	Nationality and location while studying .....	138
5.1.3	Academic characteristics.....	138
5.1.3.1	Degree type.....	138
5.1.3.2	Entry qualification level .....	140

5.1.3.3	Accreditation of prior learning (APL) .....	142
5.1.4	Socio-economic status and background .....	145
5.1.4.1	Principal economic status of graduates at entry .....	145
5.1.4.2	Employment Sector at entry .....	145
5.1.4.3	Employment classification at entry.....	146
5.1.4.4	Employment group at entry .....	146
5.1.4.5	Social economic group at entry .....	146
5.1.4.6	Social background .....	147
5.1.5	Accounts of habitus.....	152
5.1.5.1	Always mine .....	152
5.1.5.2	Debt aversion .....	154
5.1.5.3	Fragmented transitioning .....	155
5.1.6	Accounts of field .....	158
5.1.6.1	Always time .....	158
5.1.6.2	Why distance education?.....	159
5.1.6.3	Why this institution?.....	163
5.1.7	Accounts of capital.....	165
5.1.7.1	Why do a degree? .....	165
5.1.8	Summary of pre-participation findings .....	172
5.2	The participation phase .....	176
5.2.1	Duration of study .....	176
5.2.2	Classification of award .....	176
5.2.3	Fee payment .....	177
5.2.4	Support factors .....	178
5.2.5	Obstacles to successful completion .....	181
5.2.5.1	Time .....	181
5.2.5.2	Isolation.....	183
5.2.5.3	Institutional habitus .....	184
5.2.5.4	State systems .....	189
5.2.5.5	Technology .....	189
5.2.6	Programme evaluation .....	190
5.2.7	Summary of findings from the participation phase .....	194
5.3	The post-participation phase .....	196
5.3.1	Principal economic status .....	197
5.3.2	Socio-economic group .....	199
5.3.3	Employment sector .....	199



5.3.4	Employment classification .....	200
5.3.5	Employment group .....	200
5.3.6	Graduate earnings.....	201
5.3.7	Graduate mobility .....	201
5.3.8	Length of time with current employer.....	202
5.3.9	Factors important to employability .....	205
5.3.10	Graduate level employment .....	208
5.3.11	The Interviewees: Accounts of habitus, field and capital. ....	213
5.3.11.1	Habitus and time .....	213
5.3.11.2	Habitus and field: no self left behind? .....	216
5.3.11.3	Stories of capital: graduates as agents of social transformation .....	220
5.3.12	Summary of post-participation findings .....	222
5.4	Chapter summary.....	223
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>224</b>
6.1	Revisiting the research questions .....	224
6.1.1	Pre-participation phase.....	225
6.1.2	Participation phase .....	227
6.1.3	Post-participation phase-graduate employability .....	229
6.2	Critical Reflections on Bourdieu.....	232
6.3	Contribution.....	236
6.4	Recommendations .....	238
6.4.1	Recommendations for practice.....	238
6.4.2	Recommendations for policy makers .....	238
6.4.3	Recommendations for employers.....	239
6.4.4	Recommendations for future research.....	239
6.5	Final reflection .....	240
	<b>References.....</b>	<b>241</b>
	<b>Appendix A: Versions of Open Education Application Forms.....</b>	<b>298</b>
	<b>Appendix B: Graduate Survey .....</b>	<b>305</b>
	<b>Appendix C: Employability Survey.....</b>	<b>309</b>
	<b>Appendix D: Draft Interview Schedule .....</b>	<b>312</b>
	<b>Appendix E: Profile of Interviewees .....</b>	<b>313</b>
	<b>Appendix F.....</b>	<b>314</b>
	<b>Appendix G: Cross-tabulation of education at entry and attainment of H1 classification in final award.....</b>	<b>315</b>
	<b>Appendix H: Cross-tabulation of socio-economic status of graduates.....</b>	<b>316</b>
	<b>Appendix I: Reasons why graduates were working abroad .....</b>	<b>317</b>

## **List of Abbreviations**

DCU	Dublin City University
DE	Distance Education
FE	Further Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HE	Higher Education
IoT	Institute of Technology
IT	Information Technology
OU	Open University
RGAM	Recurrent Grant Allocation Model
UK	United Kingdom

## List of tables

	Pg.
3.1 Main influences on the annual rate of growth of real earning of graduates, 1995-2003	82
4.1 Case study questions and related propositions	100
4.2 Survey Design Principles	110
4.3 Numbers of graduates surveyed	116
4.4 Profile of interviewees (potential and actual)	120
4.5 Potential interviewees: reasons for non-interview	121
4.6 Interview requests by year of graduation	121
4.7 General profile of interviewees compared to general profile of graduate population	122
5.1 Gender, age, nationality and domicile of 2012-2015 graduate cohort	136
5.2 Academic characteristics of graduate population at entry	142
5.3 Employment related factors of graduates at commencement of their studies	149
5.4 Socio-economic status and educational attainment of graduate survey respondents and their parents together with socio-economic background of new entrants to full-time Irish university	150
5.5 Most important reasons for returning to education cited in application forms	167
5.6 Motivation of interviewees to return to HE	171
5.7 Academic profile of graduate population	176
5.8 Employment group and economic status of graduates at entry and after graduation	196
5.9 Comparison of socio-economic factors for graduates at entry and after graduation	197
5.10 Comparison of job titles before study and after graduation	202
5.11 Graduate earnings, mobility and length of time with current employer	203

## List of figures

	Pg.
3.1 Claim-affirmation model of modalities of emergent identity	73
5.1 Distance graduate numbers: 2012-2015	135
5.2 First-time undergraduate new entrants to HE aged 18–20 in the 2011/12 academic year as a percentage of the total number in that age cohort for the Dublin geographic area	138
5.3 County or origin for Irish domiciled full-time undergraduate new entrants 2014/2015	139
5.4 BSc Graduates: Education at Entry	143
5.5 BA Graduates: Education at Entry	143
5.6 Percentage of graduates who reported that the given reason was very relevant or relevant when deciding to study by distance education	158
5.7 Percentage of graduates who reported that the given reason was very important or important when choosing the institution.	162
5.8 Percentage of graduates who reported that the given reason was very important or important when deciding to do a degree.	164
5.9 Motivation for distance learning by gender cited in application forms	168
5.10 Motivation for participation in distance education by socio-economic group as cited in application forms	168
5.11 Percentage of graduates who reported that the indicated sources of support were either very important or important in helping them to successfully complete the degree.	177
5.12 Percentage of graduates who reported that the indicated obstacles were very relevant or relevant to them during the course of their studies.	180
5.13 Percentage of respondents who strongly agree or agree with the given statements regarding course evaluation	189
5.14 Percentage of graduates who reported that the give reason was very important or important in relation to their employability	204
5.15 Percentage of graduates who reported that, thinking about their current job, they strongly agree or agree with the given statement	207
5.16 Percentage of graduates by year of graduation who reported that, thinking about their current job, they strongly agree or agree with the given statement	209

# Abstract

**Part-time university graduates: social class, distance learning, employability and Pierre**

**Bourdieu**

**Lorraine Delaney**

While access to higher education (HE) has substantially increased over the past number of years, the evidence suggests that social inequalities continue to be reproduced in terms of course level, field of study and institutional status. This in turn can impact on individual labour market outcomes.

This study employs Social Reproduction theory as an analytical framework. Using Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital as a lens, it examines the social class, participation experience and employment outcomes of those who completed an undergraduate degree part-time, through distance education. There is a dearth of research on the part-time student experience and also on the impact of completing a part-time degree on employability. Mixed methods of data collection were employed which included an analysis of institutional documents on 268 distance graduates, an online survey (126 respondents) and 17 semi-structured interviews.

Findings indicate that graduates typically share a working class habitus. They possess a long held desire to complete their degree. They sought part-time, distance university study as the opportunity cost of full-time attendance was simply too high. The study posits that without part-time higher education, significant progress in widening participation is improbable. The research identified a potentially new conceptualization of the part-time learner; one who has already participated in further or higher education at a level below honours degree, and who now wishes to top up that existing qualification to honours degree status through part-time/distance learning. During their participation graduates felt comfortable with other students on their course but did not feel part of the university. The literature identifies that our employability is something we negotiate with others. This study posits that, for part-time distance graduates, in addition to this process of convincing others, the graduate must also convince themselves of the value of their own achievement. Transitioning to graduate employment, and developing a graduate identity, can therefore be a slow external *and* internal process of negotiation.

# 1 Introduction

Higher education is challenged to continue advancing the equity cause, not as an add on but as an integral element in its broader intellectual, cultural, social and economic purposes...Higher education has a key role in advancing the values of justice, democratic life and their wider dissemination in society. This is not a separate, free-standing, theoretically disposable role, but a central or core value, part of the enduring concept of education as universal enlightenment, civic development and personal fulfilment (Skilbeck 2000, p. i).

The aim of this thesis is to describe and explore the experience of distance graduates in one organisation, the Open Education Unit at Dublin City University (hereafter, DCU). The experience of part-time graduates is under-examined in the literature. We know little about part-time students (Butcher 2015), the impact of part-time study (Bennion et al. 2011) and more specifically the consequences of completing a part-time degree on employability (Feinstein et al. 2007; Woodfield 2011). This study seeks to examine the socio-economic profile, participation experience and employability outcomes of part-time distance graduates.

The focus of the study is on those who completed an honours primary degree (level 8 degree, Bologna first cycle qualification) through distance education<sup>1</sup> between 2012 and 2015 inclusively. Distance students are generally regarded as part-time students to the extent that they have minimal attendance requirements and may register for less than 60 credits in each academic year. This research is intended to provide a more detailed understanding of distance learners and to help ensure they are written into the narrative of Irish Higher Education (HE).

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<sup>1</sup> Moore and Kearsley (2012, p. 2) offer the following definition of distance education:

Distance education is teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as special institutional organisation.

## 1.1 Research questions

The research examines the graduates' experience from three perspectives: their pre-participation experience, participation experience and post-graduation employability experiences. Three inter-connected research questions represent the different perspectives on the experience of distance graduates:

1. Why, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, do people complete an undergraduate degree by distance education?
2. How have distance graduates experienced the field of distance university education?
3. How does completion of a distance degree impact on the employability of graduates?

## 1.2 Rationale for this study

As social inequality becomes an increasingly important issue in modern societies the problem of inequality of access to higher education continues to persist (Elias and Purcell 2011; McDonough and Loughrey 2009; Piketty 2014; Thomas and Quinn 2007; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Certain groups are consistently underrepresented, in particular those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and mature<sup>2</sup> students. These groups are unlikely to be mutually exclusive to the extent that older students are more likely to be from lower socio economic backgrounds and have delayed their participation in higher education for reasons related to social class (Chesters and Watson 2014; Croxford and Raffe 2014). Social class is therefore positioned at the centre of discussions on inequality (Marginson 2015; Nesbit 2006; Robertson 2015; Waller et al. 2014).

As part of the Masters in Education and Training Management (eLearning) programme at DCU, I engaged with the topic of online learning and retention in distance education. I became interested in finding out more about how technology was supporting access to university programmes. This research topic is important as we know little about part-time students (Butcher 2015, Feinstein et al. 2007, Woodfield 2011). There is an assumption that part-time

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<sup>2</sup> In Ireland a *mature* student is defined as one who is at least 23 years of age on or before 1<sup>st</sup> January in the year of admission to college. Participation rates for mature students in Ireland have only become available since 2010.

flexible HE contributes to widening participation (Butcher 2015), and that the most disadvantaged students are more likely to engage in part-time study (ARC 2013). However, there is a lack of evidence (Bray et al. 2007; Butcher 2015; Woodfield 2011). Research points to the requirement for more evidence regarding the role distance HE plays in the widening participation agenda (Bray et al. 2007). This research is therefore also timely as it is set against a well-publicised desire to increase the successful participation rate of non-traditional learners in university (HEA 2015a) and also to build digital capacity within the HE sector (National Forum 2014). Distance education has become synonymous with online/digital delivery which is typically defined as a course where at least 80% of the content is delivered online (Allen et al. 2006). The concept of access is now understood ‘to encompass not only entry to higher education, but also retention and successful completion’ (EAN 2015; HEA 2008, p. 14). The focus of this study is therefore on graduates.

This chapter is presented in eight sections. Firstly, I introduce the study and the research questions. Secondly, I outline the rationale for this study. Next the research context, including the policy context is introduced. The fourth section outlines the theoretical framework of the research and explains the development of the research questions. The fifth section provides an overview of the existing literature in relation to non-traditional<sup>3</sup> graduates and identifies gaps in the existing body of knowledge and so establishes the rationale for this research. Section six introduces the research methodology, philosophical positioning and data collection methods. Section seven outlines the contribution of the research while section eight outlines the structure of the thesis.

### **1.3 Research context**

The context for this research is the Open Education Unit (formally Oscail) at DCU. DCU has been providing distance education since 1982 when the National Distance Education Centre (Oscail) was established, in co-operation with Irish third level institutions, with a brief to provide undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes by distance education to adults in Ireland and abroad (MacKeogh 2003). Distance students are traditionally defined as being

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<sup>3</sup> The generic term *non-traditional student* is applied to students who are normally underrepresented in higher education in relation to their number in the overall population (Field and Morgan Klein 2013).



off-campus and separated from their teacher (Keegan 1980). It is this which distinguishes them from conventional part-time students.

In the early stages of Irish distance education students received course materials through the mail and attended infrequent face-to-face tutorials held throughout Ireland, in various higher education institutions, coordinated from a base in DCU. In 2006 Oscail began a process of online delivery using WebCT as a virtual learning environment system. This was expanded to incorporate a synchronous web based tutorial delivery system in 2011. Currently DCU's distance undergraduate students are primarily off-campus and complete their studies in a blended format: a mixture of face-to-face tutorials and online delivery.

Since 1982 over 5,700 distance students have graduated with an undergraduate degree through distance education at DCU. By way of comparison, the DCU Access service has graduated 600 students over 21 years (DCU Access Report 2011). Both services seek to broaden access to Irish higher education; the Access service seeks to accommodate those who can attend university full-time but would be highly unlikely to do so if not financially supported. Distance education, on the other hand, accommodates those who are in a position to pay fees, but not in a position to attend.

At its inception Oscail had a national remit and so received subvention from the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Subvention was withdrawn in 2009 at which stage Oscail was incorporated into the overall structure of DCU. In Ireland, current government policy is to fund universities for full-time students but not off-campus/online students. The HEA's Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM) currently excludes institutional funding for Adult Education, Distance Education and Outreach Education at level 8 and above. However, in a consultation document circulated in July 2012 the HEA (2012a, p. 5) state that reforms to be implemented for the 2014 grant allocation will:

*Include in the university RGAM programmes that are currently excluded i.e. distance education and off-campus provision (level 8 and above). To be phased in commencing in 2014.*

To date (2016) this has not taken place. This means that student fees provide the only resource for the development of part-time distance programmes, and because there is a limit to the fees

students can or will pay, part-time distance programme development is also limited (DCU currently offer just five undergraduate degree programmes by distance education.)

In 2013 DCU announced the launch of a new National Institute for Digital Learning, incorporating the existing units of Learning Innovation now called the Teaching Enhancement Unit and Oscail, now called the Open Education Unit (the case under study).

### **1.3.1 Policy context**

This research took place in the context of a well-publicised crisis in higher education funding in Ireland (Cassells 2015) together with a stated policy objective to increase the numbers of students participating in part-time/flexible learning (HEA 2015a). Research leading to a better understanding of successful part-time students is therefore timely. Part-time/flexible provision is defined as ‘participation that leads to less than sixty credits per academic year’ (HEA 2015a, p. 37).

In recent decades Ireland has experienced a dramatic expansion in higher education participation. The progression rate currently at 52% (HEA 2014) is set to increase to 72% by 2020 (EGFSN 2007, p. 92). However, research indicates that certain groups continue to be under-represented. Some theorists argue that increased participation in full-time higher education will inevitably result in an increase in social inclusion (Gorard 2008). However, inequalities can nevertheless be reproduced in terms of course level, field of study and institutional status (Fleming and Finnegan 2011; Ianelli 2011). The abolition of Irish university tuition fees for undergraduates in 1996 facilitated middle class families to invest more heavily in second level education (Lynch 2006). The net result of this is that young people from higher socio-economic groups perform better in the competition for university places than those from working class backgrounds (Denny 2010). Participation at higher education by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds is therefore likely to be low or characterised by involvement in lower status courses (Fleming and Finnegan 2011), for example at level 6 (certificate) or 7 (diploma/ordinary degree), where the required points for entry are lower. A similar situation exists in the US, Scotland and England (Alon 2009; Gallacher 2009; Sutton Trust 2010). This can be problematic, as it is felt that the normal arguments relating to the

benefits of higher education are ‘usually based on more traditional undergraduate degree courses’ (Gorard 2008, p. 427). Additionally, those with honours degree qualifications (level 8), or higher, find it easiest to obtain employment (OECD 2015, p. 27). The possibility of economic mobility therefore, from lower level courses, is often slight as they tend to have a low value in the labour market.

Where a discourse exists around continuously increasing participation rates, those who have not participated can feel particularly disadvantaged. In 2011, in Ireland, 73% of men and 66% of women were educated to upper secondary level only (CSO 2012a, p. 9).

The number of part-time/flexible undergraduate students has doubled in Ireland since 2007 (Cassells 2015) and was estimated at 21,062 in 2014/2015. While the number of full-time undergraduates increased by 4% since 2010/2011, the number of part-time undergraduates has increased by 9% in the same time frame (HEA 2015b). Most of this participation is in the non-university sector and on qualifications below honours degree level (HEA 2015b, p. 10).

The National Strategy for Higher Education in Ireland (Hunt 2011) recommended increased flexibility in Irish higher education provision if levels of higher education attainment and lifelong learning were to increase. The European Commission (2014, p. 11) too assert that ‘flexibility is essential for non-traditional learners’. The flexibility provided by technology has enormous potential to widen and deepen access to higher education and support lifelong learning and continuing professional development.

In its most recent iteration of the National Plan for Equity of Access to HE (HEA 2015b, p. 34) the Irish government seeks to increase participation in higher education by six specific groups:

- first-time, mature entrants
- entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education
- students with disabilities
- Irish Travellers
- part-time/flexible learners
- further education award holders

This thesis argues that there is an intersectionality between some of these groups, for example mature students are more likely to be part-time learners (European Commission 2015). Age, in turn, is often related to socio-economic background, with adults more likely to have delayed

their participation in higher education for reasons related to social class (Brine and Waller 2004; Chesters and Watson 2014; Croxford and Raffe 2014). Further education (FE) award holders too are likely to be from lower socio-economic groups (Fleming and Finnegan 2011; Iannelli 2011) and tend to have chosen FE in constrained financial circumstances, knowing that their course will be short and allow them to enter the labour market sooner rather than later (Furlong and Cartmel 2005). We need to be realistic about the amount of time FE award holders are prepared to spend in full-time HE. They are more likely to require part-time study options that allow them to work while simultaneously topping up their low level qualification to honours degree. The overarching problem with the current National Access Plan is that funding to widen participation is funnelled exclusively into full-time courses, even though research tells us that most of the target groups are more likely to require part-time course provision. There are additional problems with the target for part-time/flexible learners.

Firstly, postgraduates are included in the stated objective to increase the number of students in part-time/flexible HE by approximately 11,000 over the next five years (HEA 2015a, p. 36). Postgraduate students have normally already successfully participated in university study and arguably should not form part of a targeted 'under-represented' group. As there are no separate targets for undergraduates and postgraduates, universities are likely to preference increasing their numbers of postgraduate courses as they are often more cost-effective to provide and students are arguably easier to teach and retain because of their pre-existing level of education. Funding for widening participation initiatives should be concentrated on those who do not already have university qualifications.

Secondly, objectives to encourage HE institutions to increase part-time provision are largely empty without funding to support them. Resources at least equivalent if not greater than those provided for full-time course provision are required to build part-time provision. Even with equivalent funding, full-time students remain a more attractive option for institutions. This is because they complete more credits in a shorter time frame thus allowing institutions to process them in greater numbers through the system and so receive more funding. Targets for the number of part-time learners are therefore essential.

Finally, while the explicit definition of part-time/flexible as being courses of less than 60 ECTS credits per academic year is welcome, it must be borne in mind that part-time and flexible are not necessarily the same; ‘not all flexible provision is part-time and not all part-time provision is that flexible’ (ARC 2013, p. vi). Along with a reduction in the number of ECTS credits taken each year, courses must accommodate those who work full-time, do not live close to a HE institution or whose ability to attend regularly is similarly limited. Notions of ‘part-time’ and ‘flexible’ need to be carefully constructed and must reflect the needs of the learners whose participation we seek to increase.

Because part-time HE is not state funded in Ireland, institutions are not accountable to the state for the progression of part-time students. Therefore, there has been little detailed examination of the part-time student population, experience, needs or outcomes. Such evidence could help support the rationale for developing a vibrant part-time/flexible sector, or at least make it a difficult sector for policy makers to ignore.

The net result of a lack of investment in part-time HE in Ireland means that its provision is hopelessly under-developed. Supply is characterized by a limited range of courses offered by a limited range of institutions. The current policy around funding part-time flexible courses is focused on addressing the skills gap in the labour market. Whilst the development of the new apprenticeship scheme (QQI 2016) is welcome, it is fundamentally inequitable. While funded full-time students can study what they like, funded part-time students must study from a limited range of courses that address labour market shortages.

An additional problem exists to the extent that institutional services are largely set up to support full-time, on campus students. Limited support services are available for part-time/flexible learners, yet non-traditional students in full-time higher education are regarded as ‘at risk’ and receive sustained, targeted supports. Furthermore, there is little in the way of coordinated public provision of information and guidance to those who want to study part-time. Certainly there is no ‘accessible, coordinated application system’ (HEA 2012, p. 5) available to school leavers or others who might want to apply for part-time courses. Part-time options may become increasingly important to working class second-level students if a student

loan system is introduced in Ireland, as research indicates that working class students tend to be debt-averse (Butcher 2015, p. 7).

In sum, in order to achieve the targets set out by the HEA for broadening access it would seem imperative that part-time/flexible options in Irish higher education provision are developed and supported. However, the future development of policy in relation to part-time/flexible students is hindered by our lack of knowledge about this group.

## **1.4 Theoretical framework**

When I began this study I wanted to find out what was already known about distance graduates in order to be able to identify what I might contribute to the existing body of knowledge. I quickly realised very little had been written about the distance graduate experience, and so I decided to widen my search to the literature on non-traditional graduates more generally. What struck me most forcibly was the extent to which the research on full-time non-traditional graduates was grounded in sociology theory. Yet few were applying sociology theory to distance education and no one was applying it to the experience of distance graduates. Social reproduction theory, in particular the work of Pierre Bourdieu, offers enormous potential to develop our understanding of why people chose part-time university study, and how this impacts on their participation and post-participation employability experiences.

Derived from the theories of Bourdieu (1979, 1990), a social reproduction framework is employed in this study, using the concepts of *habitus*, *field* and *capital*. Social reproduction theory contends that societal structures tend to reproduce privilege and disadvantage, and that HE is one of the primary vehicles of social reproduction. Two key tenants of Bourdieu's social reproduction theory underpin this research. They are as follows:

1. *In short, the lower a student's social origin, the more his access to higher education has to be paid for by a restriction on choice....* (Bourdieu 1990, p. 229)
2. *Thus, scholastic age (i.e. age at a given education level) is a transformed form of inherited cultural capital, and lost years are a step towards relegation or elimination.* (Bourdieu 1979, p. 104/5)

With these theoretical propositions in mind, the research questions outlined in section 1.1 were further developed:

Pre-participation phase: Why do people complete an undergraduate degree by distance education?

Are distance graduates new to, or from socio-economic groups under-represented in, higher education?

What role does social class play in their HE access experience?

Participation phase: How have distance graduates experienced the field of university education?

What obstacles do successful students face in the field of distance university education?

How do successful distance students accrue capital from their social networks, both inside and outside their courses?

Post-graduation phase: How does completion of a distance degree impact on employability?

Are 'lost years a step toward relegation or elimination' (Bourdieu 1979, p. 105) for distance graduates?

How does social class impact on the employability of graduates?

## **1.5 Existing research on non-traditional graduates**

Relatively little research has been conducted on graduates of part-time undergraduate programmes (Bennion et al. 2011; Butcher 2015). Additionally, few studies have examined who distance graduates are; why they choose to study by distance instead of part-time or full-time, their participation experience and the impact of completing a part-time/distance degree on their employability (Feinstein et al. 2007; Woodfield 2011). Bray et al. (2007, p. 894) identify that there is 'little empirical evidence, positive or negative, of the ability of distance education to address these (i.e. access) problems'<sup>4</sup> There has been relatively little theorisation of the part-time or distance student experience (Saba 2000; Perraton 2000; Bray et al. 2007; Zawacki-

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<sup>4</sup> My parenthesis.

Richter 2009). This limits the understanding and progression of the research field. No study has been undertaken on distance graduates in an Irish context.

The dearth of literature on distance graduates forced me to consider the literature on non-traditional graduates of all undergraduate degree programmes. Here I restricted my review to graduates who were adults and/or from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Many of the reasons for under-representation in HE are linked to educational disadvantage prior to entering higher education and are difficult to overcome subsequently (Furlong and Cartmel 2005). For non-traditional students university is not experienced as a level playing field (Bathmaker 2013; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Ianelli 2011). Hurdles arise within the HE system which impact on participation. It follows then that the experience graduates have once they leave higher education is impacted in no small way by their experiences before and during HE participation (Bathmaker 2013; Carroll 2011; Furlong and Cartmel 2005, 2007). In this way graduate outcomes are influenced by three key experiential phases: the pre-university experience, the university participatory experience, and the graduate experience. The literature review chapter examines the literature on non-traditional graduates in the light of these three key experiential phases.

## **1.6 Research methodology**

This research is a case study of the Open Education Unit at DCU. Case studies are defined as being the exploration, explanation, or description of a single entity - the case, bounded by time and activity and using a variety of data collection methods (Merriam 1988; Yin 1981; Creswell 2007). The literature review, informed by the research aims, was used to develop the data collection instruments: surveys and interviews.

This research is organized into three distinct but related stages. The first stage of the research consisted of an analysis of institutional records on all those who had graduated with a level 8 degree between 2012 and 2015 (n=268). Graduates' original course application forms were the main source of this data.



The second stage of the research consisted of an online graduate survey. This stage consisted of two phases: a Graduate Survey phase (conducted shortly after graduation) and an Employability Survey phase (conducted towards the end of the data collection phase in 2015).

Themes from Stage 1 and Stage 2 informed the schedule of questions employed in Stage 3, the interview stage. This consisted of 17 semi-structured, one-to-one, recorded interviews, which took place either face to face or over the Internet using the software application, Skype.

This study is primarily a qualitative study, grounded in the constructivist paradigm with a focus on interpretative understanding. The interpretative tradition emphasises the way in which knowledge and meaning are socially constructed. My research, rooted in the interpretative tradition, seeks to explore, with a view to understanding, the role of agency and structure<sup>5</sup> in graduate outcomes.

## 1.7 Contribution of the thesis

The data from this study demonstrates that employability is a complex process of *internal* negotiation as the graduate must convince themselves of the value of their own achievement. This is a contribution to the literature as it contrasts with the existing conceptualization of employability which identifies it as a largely *external* process of negotiation which ‘takes place over time and in interaction with others’ (Holmes 2013, p. 548).

The literature closely associates employability with graduate identity (Holmes 2013) but provides largely descriptive accounts of what a graduate identity is. It is, for example described as having a broad understanding of disciplinary knowledge (Reid et al. 2008), and a capacity to transfer skills across contexts (Jackson 2013). Findings from this study reveal that building a graduate identity is also an internal process and may be conceptualized as *a belief in one’s capacity to successfully belong* to a particular group.

This research study of distance graduates evidences the role distance education plays in *broadening and deepening* access to under-represented groups. Contrary to the existing

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<sup>5</sup> The term ‘structure’ relates to factors which might limit individual action (such as class or race), while ‘agency’ relates to the capacity of individuals for independent action (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

literature (Chesters and Watson 2014; Croxford and Raafe 2014) this study finds that adults have not necessarily delayed their participation in HE for reasons related to social class. Rather, they had been participating incrementally since leaving school, often on a part-time basis, and were building slowly to degree completion. Instead of *delayed* participation, working-class students' participation in HE is regularly *protracted* for reasons most often related to social class. This thesis identifies a potentially new conceptualisation of the part-time student as one who has already participated in further or higher education, often on a part-time basis, and who now wishes to deepen their access through part-time study.

The evidence from this case is that graduates want to study part-time. This is important as current policy to broaden access to HE assumes under-represented groups want to study full-time, resulting in funding being almost exclusively funnelled into full-time course provision. Social class impacted on the graduates entering the labour market as soon as possible after completion of compulsory education. They indicated an unwillingness to enter into debt to pursue their education.

Graduates had most regularly been propelled back to education by a desire to improve their employability and life chances. When selecting an institution, graduates in this study were concerned with the status of the credential and did not want their degree flagged in any way as a 'distance' degree.

The greatest obstacle graduates faced during participation had been the time demands of family and work. Graduates also identified feeling isolated, less valued than full-time students and excluded from institutional supports.

To date, no study has explored the particular position of part-time distance university graduates in an Irish context.

## **1.8 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis set out to profile distance graduates in one institution, examine their pre-participation and participation experience and the impact of completing a distance degree on their employability.

Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework of the research and establishes a link between social reproduction theory and distance education. This section allows the central questions to be developed further.

Chapter 3 reviews the existing body of literature in relation to non-traditional graduates. This is done by examining the pre-participation, participation and post-graduation experiences of this cohort of learners. A dearth of literature on distance graduates is established. Additionally, the undertheorisation of distance education research is identified. Gaps in the existing body of knowledge are articulated, establishing the rationale for this research study.

Chapter 4 is the methodology chapter. The methodological approach is case study which has been described in section 1.6 . This chapter also outlines the limitations of the study.

Chapter 5 reports and analyses the findings from the research under the three key experiential phases: pre-participation, participation and post-graduation. The findings are discussed in relation to previous research studies and also how they contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

Chapter 6 is the concluding chapter. Here consideration is given to the significance and implications of the research. Recommendations for policy, practice and further research are identified.

## 2 The Theoretical Framework: Social Reproduction Theory

The ways in which 'social class' and 'higher education' are conceptualised will have important implications for how research concerned with 'widening participation' is imagined and undertaken (Archer 2003, p. 6).

The focus of this chapter is on establishing relevance between distance education, social class and social reproduction theory and access to, and participation in, higher education more generally.

Distance education was founded in the early nineteenth century to make education available to 'those who were otherwise unprovided for' (Moore and Kearsley 2012, p. 25). The University of London, one of the first distance education providers, established its External Programme in 1858 (University of London 2014). It became known as the 'People's University' as it primarily attracted people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Implicit in this is acknowledgement of the relatively high participation rates in conventional university education of certain social groups at the expense of others. The underrepresentation in university participation by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds continues to be a cause for concern among social commentators today (Bolton 2010; Harmon and Foubert 2011; Piketty 2014). It would be remiss therefore, to examine distance education, whose purpose is to widen participation in higher education, without introducing the concept of social class. This chapter will explore the concept of class and social reproduction theory, with particular reference to higher education access and participation. It will examine the conceptual framework of Bourdieu in relation to *habitus*, *field* and *capital* in order to better understand inequality of access to higher education. Finally, it will explore the relevance of Bourdieu's conceptual framework to distance education.

### 2.1 The concept of class

The first known use of the term 'class' was by the Romans, who employed the term 'classis' to segregate the population into tax groups (Dahrendorf 1959, p. 3). Classical sociologists, for example Marx (1818-1883) and Weber (1864-1920) employed the concept of class as a tool of analysis. For Marx, class was caught up in ownership and control of the means of production.

According to Marx, society was divided primarily into two classes, the bourgeoisie (entrepreneurs) and the proletariat (workers). Weber on the other hand focused on the pluralistic conceptualisation of class i.e. that class division is not simply dichotomous. Rather a 'complex typology' exists within classes (Giddens 1981, p. 42).

Social scientists continue to recognise that society is divided into distinct social groups or classes. Groups can be distinguished in various ways, for example by income, wealth, power, education, religion, ethnicity or culture. However, social class, according to Poulantzas (1978, p. 69) is a 'concept which indicates the effects of a totality of structures'. In a similar vein Bourdieu (1979) offers the following definition:

Social class is not defined by a property (not even the most determinant one, such as the volume and composition of capital) nor by a collection of properties (of sex, age, social origin, ethnic origin - proportion of blacks and whites, for example, or natives and immigrants - income, education level etc.), nor even by a chain of properties strung out from a fundamental property (position in the relations of production) in relation of cause and effect, conditioner and conditioned; but by the structure of relations between all the pertinent properties which gives its specific value to each of them and to the effect they exert on practices.' (Bourdieu 1979, p. 106)

According to Bourdieu those who share common 'external conditions of existence' *and* common 'internalized dispositions', share a common social class habitus. While Bourdieu's definition is rich, and useful in aiding our understanding of the complexities of social class, it can be problematic not least of all because of the difficulty in measuring such a broad based concept (Sullivan 2001; Brubaker 2004). Therefore, although there is no single agreed definition of social class, occupation and educational attainment are the most widely used indicators in census classification and other research. While this type of measurement is regarded as functionalist, its limitations, to the extent that it does not include any additional factors in its analysis, are at least well recognized. What appears to be consistent among researchers is that one's place in society, one's social classification, can have major implications for one's life conditions, choices and outcomes (McDonagh and Loughney 2009; Piketty 2014; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).

## 2.2 Social class theory

Theories of social class have evolved from the classical theorists, such as Marx and Weber. It is generally accepted that in the Marxian model of social class 'economic domination is tied to political domination' (Giddens 1981, p. 28); dominant classes dominate both wealth and power. Marx identified that class groups were not necessarily uniform in structure and were more likely to be internally diverse; though he never actually theorized this idea (Giddens 1981). For Marx 'class' was a mechanism to explain 'the production and reproduction of social life' (Brubaker 2004).

For Weber 'social class is formed of a cluster of class situations which are linked together by virtue of the fact that they involve common mobility chances, either within the career of individuals or across the generations' (Giddens 1981, p. 48). Weber developed one of the most important theoretical frameworks for the study of social mobility (Allen 2004). However, within the Weberian critique the likelihood of movements between classes remains low (Giddens 1981, p.48).

A subsequent approach in class theory came from the functionalists. According to Bradley (1996) functionalist theories of social stratification tend to assume meritocratic determinism based on a belief that the system remunerates the most talented (Davis and Moore 1945; Parsons 1959). According to functionalist theory low participation in higher education by certain groups could result from low levels of ability or application. The functionalist view remained dominant until the early 1970s (Drudy 1991) but has more recently been challenged by critics as being overly simplistic and failing to take into account structural inequalities relating to, for example, class, race or gender (Archer 2003; Bradley 1996; Brown and Scase 1991)

Neo-Marxists began to look at social practices as a way of understanding social class. They argue that in addition to economics, social and cultural structures can determine opportunity and so determine social class position. By the early twenty first century Marxist and neo-Marxists theories were criticized for neglecting agency, the capacity of individuals to act independently, in their models of social class.

More developed theories of social reproduction came to the fore early in the twentieth century emerging from a 'more complex, differentiated and context-sensitive form of theorising' (Gewirtz and Gribb 2003, p. 244). Such theories were focused on the way in which social structures, in particular education, caused privilege and disadvantage to be reproduced in society from one generation to the next.

The rise in neoliberalism during the mid-late twentieth century saw a movement away from a focus on 'class' and 'society' and a movement towards 'individualism' (hooks 2000).

Neoliberalism highlights the importance of the free-market, focusing on individual success rather than public good (Apple 2004). In the neo-liberal tradition, differences in wealth and income are acceptable as long as opportunity for educational attainment is equal (Thompson and Simmons 2013). As with functionalism, individuals were again seen as responsible for their own success or failure. The neo-liberalist tradition impacted on adult education in a number of ways. Education was seen as a market commodity (Lynch 2006). State funding for education in the part-time arena was limited to, and focused on, the development of a more efficient workforce (Field 2006). During this era of individualism, social class theory was somewhat neglected by the mainstream. According to hooks (2000, p. vii) 'Nowadays it is fashionable to talk about race or gender; the uncool subject is class'. hooks (2000) contends that capitalist culture has served to take the focus away from class, by uniting classes in an obsession with consumption:

Propaganda in advertising and in the culture as a whole assures the poor that they can be one with those who are more materially privileged if they own the same products. It helps sustain the false notion that ours is a classless society (hooks 2000, p. 46).

Neo-liberalism has dominated the prevailing belief, particularly in the US, UK and perhaps to a lesser extent in Ireland, that society is in fact *open* (Laureau 2003) and that if individuals work hard enough, and have innate ability they can reach the top of the social ladder.

However, this perspective is in conflict with the evidence. Societies, such as the US, are in fact becoming more unequal. Piketty (2014, p. 485), an expert on income inequality, tells us that, in the US, parental income 'has become an almost perfect predictor of university access'. Furthermore, the share of national income captured by the top 10% of households has been increasing steadily in most of the developed world since the 1970s. Additionally, Piketty argues, wealth inequality is likely to increase in the future due to the likely excess of the return

on wealth over economic growth. More recently, an awareness that more equal societies perform better on a number of indicators including; life expectancy, mental health, safety and education, has moved the focus back to a concentration on social in/equality and class difference (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Piketty 2014).

Education is seen as a route out of poverty. Yet lower socio-economic groups are consistently under-represented in higher education, most specifically in university. Why is this? In an effort to answer this question it is useful and important to examine theories of access to higher education.

### **2.3 Theories of higher education access**

According to Wells and Lynch (2012) research on access to higher education is guided by two major theoretical frameworks: rational action theory (Boudon 1974) and Bourdieu's (1977) conceptualization of habitus.

Rational action theory incorporates the view that agents make rational choices about the costs and benefits of education and make decisions to participate or not on that basis. Proponents of rational action theory identify its usefulness in distinguishing between the 'primary and secondary effects of social stratification<sup>6</sup> on educational inequality' (Thompson and Simmons 2013, p. 750).

Primary effects of social stratification are largely cultural and relate to the association between social background and educational performance. Secondary effects, on the other hand, are positional and relate to similar educational performance from those with different social backgrounds and how that impacts on educational choice (Jackson et al. 2007).

Rational action theorists (Boudon 1974; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Hanson 2008; Thompson and Simmons 2013,) critique Bourdieu, stating that he does not distinguish between primary and secondary effects but rather applies a cultural unifier in the form of habitus and field to

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<sup>6</sup> Social stratification is explained by Kerchoff as follows:

Social stratification is a term that is used to describe both a condition and a process. Social stratification as a condition refers to the fact that members of a population have characteristics that differentiate them into levels or strata. Social stratification as a process refers to the ways in which members of a population become stratified (Kerchoff 2001, p. 3).



the total educative experience. Boudon (1974, p. 23) in particular opposed the idea that different social groups had different aspirations; rather he felt aspirations were similar but actions were different because people acted rationally according to their circumstances. Their rationality was 'situated' (Thompson and Simmons 2013, p. 751) or 'bounded' (DesJardins and Toutkoushian 2005). Bourdieu attributed 'bounded' behaviour to conditioning, related to social and/or economic circumstances. Rational action theory sees people acting for reasons; Bourdieu's conception of habitus sees people acting from causes (Brubaker 2004). While critics of Bourdieu emphasise the cultural determinism of his approach, critics of Boudon insist that students' ability to make rational choices is in large part determined by their social class habitus (Wells and Lynch 2012).

Thompson & Simmons (2013, p. 746) feel that Bourdieu's thesis of social reproduction has difficulty 'in accounting for the realities of educational expansion'. Thompson and Simmons state that if habitus is a valid theory then, as educational opportunities increase in higher education, advantaged groups will avail of them at a faster rate than disadvantaged groups and class inequality in educational attainment would widen rather than remain stable, and it has remained stable in the UK (Goldthorpe 1996). They support Bourdieu's theory of Rational Action, where individuals make rational choices based on their social, cultural and economic situation (Boudon 1989, pp. 6-7). However, there are a number of grounds on which this argument can be criticised. Firstly, advantaged group participation must at some point reach saturation, and so can increase no further. Secondly, habitus orientation can and does change. Bourdieu allows for this. Therefore working class habitus can incorporate participation in HE. The key point is that working class participation continues to be at a lower status (either by course level, subject or institution) than middle class participation (Fleming and Finnegan 2011; Thompson 2009) just as Bourdieu predicted (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Finally, when analysing decision making strategies Bourdieu asks why some choices are rational for certain people but not others? This leads us back to the more fundamental issue of structures, rather than the surface level issue of reasons.

Bourdieu regarded the education system as the principle institution through which the class system was sustained. In his analysis of the French education system he asserted that working class students were unsuccessful, not because they lacked intelligence but because the system

itself favoured a middle class habitus which they did not understand; the rules of the game were unknown to them. Robbins summarises the situation as follows:

Bourdieu's conclusion seemed to suggest that the working-class students were at an unfair disadvantage and that there was a conspiratorial collusion between middle-class staff and middle-class students which meant that these students received a structurally preferential treatment which was a kind of cheating (Robbins 1993, p. 153).

Reay et al. (2004) contribute that such institutional practices can be conscious or unconscious, are part of the institutional habitus and can in turn consciously or unconsciously inform institutional practice.

Previous research has identified many reasons, other than social class, as to why some students do not progress to higher education. These include: academic achievement, academic preparation, peer influence, school type, geographic location, race, ethnicity, gender, parental expectations and financial situation (Bozick and DeLuca 2005; Cabrera and La Nasa 2001; Cullinan et al. 2013; Goldrick-Rab and Han 2011; McCoy et al. 2010; Rowan-Kenyon 2007). However, researchers acknowledge that at least some of these factors may be attributable to social class. For example, Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) in their study show that the majority of students who were not academically eligible to enrol in college were from a lower socio-economic background. Goldrick-Rab and Han (2011) report that low family income, and parental educational status, impact on preparedness for college entry and thus on subsequent participation. Cullinan et al. (2013) show that distance from a college impacts negatively on participation, but most particularly for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Gorard (2008) reminds us that higher education was never intended for everyone, and has always been based on selective entry. He asserts that in order to determine whether access to higher education is fair, based on socio-economic background, we need to demonstrate that 'certain social groups are seriously under-represented and that this under-representation has no reasonable or merited explanation' (p. 422). According to Gorard, the key to establishing this, is that we know the proportion of each social group in the wider population who could participate (i.e. who meet the entry requirements) in HE before determining whether any group is underrepresented. One of the problems with Gorard's analysis lies in the proviso 'the proportion who could participate' simply because middle class children are more likely to be eligible to participate and meet university entry requirements since their parents invest heavily

in ensuring they do so. The second problem with Gorard's thesis is that although university education was never intended for everyone, one of the primary purposes of 'public spending for education is to promote social mobility' (Piketty 2014, p. 484). If lower socio-economic groups do not, or cannot access university, this policy is failing.

In summation, according to Bourdieu (1986) the interests of the dominant classes remain recognized as the natural order, the rational outcome. And so society remains stratified according to social class. How can we explain social stratification? In order to better understand the process of social reproduction we will next examine the work of one of the most prominent social reproduction theorists, Pierre Bourdieu.

## **2.4 Pierre Bourdieu and social reproduction theory**

Bourdieu (1930-2002), a French sociologist, spent much of his career examining the French education system. His name is inextricably linked with social class, education and social reproduction. He was influenced by the classical theorists, in particular Marx, Durkheim and Weber. However Bourdieu wanted to move beyond narrow definitions of class, rejecting the notion of a single-factor definition (Brubaker 2004, p. 53). According to Brubaker (2004) Bourdieu extended the concept of class from Marx's idea of economics, Durkheim's idea of culture and Weber's notion of symbolic goods and practices to arrive at a more complex and nuanced definition. For Bourdieu, common internalized dispositions *and* common external conditions of existence defined common social class habitus (Bourdieu 1984).

In order to aid understanding of exactly what is meant by 'dispositions' and 'external conditions of existence' Bourdieu developed new methodological frameworks around the concepts of *habitus*, *field* and *capital*. Bourdieu contends that these three distinct concepts facilitate us in synthesising the social world.

Bourdieu's conceptual framework, together with his 'analysis of intra-class divisions' was his uniquely original contribution to the study of class structure (Brubaker 2004, p.55). Bourdieu's examination of intra-class division focused on the middle and upper classes, it did not extend to the working classes (Brubaker 2004, p. 55). Nevertheless the conceptual tool-box provided by Bourdieu facilitates us to interrogate our own research and make meaning of our data. This

thesis endeavours to appropriate Bourdieu's tools and apply them in the context of distance education.

Bourdieu was concerned with the role the educational system played in perpetuating class difference by reproducing class based privilege and disadvantage. Bourdieu's seminal text: *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (co-written with Jean-Claude Passeron in 1977) is of major significance in the field of social class and education. The text outlines how the education system contributes to reproducing (pre)existing social structures. The term *Reproduction* refers to the way in which dominant groups replicate their power and position of advantage in society. According to the authors, education is a major driver of this process, reproducing privilege and disadvantage in a manner that appears legitimate. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977):

Every institutionalized education system (...) owes the specific characteristics of its structure and function to the fact that, by the means proper to the institution, it has to produce and reproduce the institutional conditions whose existence and persistence (self-reproduction of the system) are necessary both to the exercise of its essential function of the inculcation and to the fulfilment of its function of reproducing a cultural arbitrary which it does not produce (cultural reproduction), the reproduction of which contributes to the reproduction of the relations between the groups or classes (social reproduction) (p. 54).

## 2.5 Bourdieu's conceptual framework

A thorough examination of the multiple facets of Bourdieu's work is beyond the scope of this thesis. However some aspects of his work are crucial to the discussion. Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* are so interlinked that it is almost impossible to consider them in isolation. Together they generate what Bourdieu termed the logic of practice (Bourdieu 1990a). For Bourdieu, they are 'open concepts designed to guide empirical work' (Bourdieu 1990a, p. 107).

### 2.5.1 The concept of *habitus*

Habitus is a Latin word which is defined as a 'habitual or typical condition, state or appearance' (Jenkins 1992, p. 74). Bourdieu was not the first to employ the idea of habitus as he himself points out: 'the notion of habitus has been used innumerable times in the past by authors as different as Hegel, Husserl, Weber, Durkheim...' (Bourdieu 1990a, p. 12) However, the concept was extended by Bourdieu (1973) as follows:

The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable, *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 72)

In essence habitus relates to 'class-specific dispositions' (Lareau and Weininger 2008, p. 127), with *dispositions* encompassing 'predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination' (Bourdieu 1973, p. 214). Habitus predisposes us to 'reproduce the social conditions of our own production, but in a relatively unpredictable way' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 87). This is important. Bourdieu did not intend habitus to dictate behaviour. For him, 'the habitus goes hand-in-hand with vagueness and indeterminacy' (Bourdieu 1990a). Brubaker (2004) contends that habitus envelops both objectivism and subjectivism, ascribing social meaning to subjective acts:

This central disposition of Bourdieu's sociological habitus equipped him to capture in a remarkably rich and subtle manner the 'intrinsically dual' nature of social life, at once objective and subjective, external and internal, material and symbolic, patterned yet improvised, constrained yet (conditionally) free, and to integrate these moments in all his sociological accounts (Brubaker 2004, p. 27).

In this way Bourdieu seeks to traverse the dynamics of structure and agency. Habitus is the mediating influence between 'human agency and social structure' (Espinoza 2012, p. 19). Habitus predisposes people to act in certain ways, but it does not predetermine action. (This idea is however contested, as we will see later when we look at Bourdieu's critics.)

Habitus is embodied (Reay 2004; Shilling 2004). It is manifest in the way people walk, talk, feel, and think. While habitus is not a conscious concept we are fundamentally and subliminally aware of where we will feel comfortable, where we feel we belong. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 127):

when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted.

Conversely, if habitus encounters a world of which it is not the product, it can feel like a 'fish out of water'. A study by Lambert et al. (2004) identifies a feeling of not fitting in as the most important reason given for students leaving college early. This has a particular relevance to working class students in conventional higher education. The process by which working class students assimilate into higher education has been termed as *embourgeoisement* (Harker 1984, p. 118). Working class students often struggle with this assimilation. Lynch (1994, p. 318) puts forward the following position:

Working class people who succeed in the education system have to abandon certain features of their background class habitus...in a way that is not really true of other socially mobile groups. Once educated they will cease to be working class in a way that a woman, no matter what her social position, will never cease to be a woman; a person who is black will never cease to be black...Their defining identity in social class terms is automatically changed by virtue of their educational success; there is no other marginal or dominated group for whom this holds true to the same degree.

Reay et al. (2001) posit that habitus is capable of change though this change process is difficult:

Habitus produces action, but because it confines possibilities to those feasible for the social groups the individual belongs to, much of the time those actions tend to be reproductive rather than transformative' (para. 1.2).

However, Di Maggio (1979) contends that habitus can be reframed as a result of individual experience and Reay, in later writings (2004), concurs, stating that implicit in the concept of habitus is the possibility of transformation. According to Reay (2004):

Habitus can be transformed through a process that either raises or lowers an individual's expectations. Implicit in the concept is the possibility of a social trajectory that enables conditions of living that are very different from initial ones (p. 435).

Such transformation may not be without cost to the individuals involved (Lynch 1994; hooks 2002; Reay 2004). Indeed Bourdieu highlights that this is likely:

Such experiences tend to produce a habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities. (Bourdieu 1999, p. 511)

Bourdieu uses habitus to refer to how individuals are socialised, how they are introduced to the norms and practices of their social class or groups. Habitus is acquired first and foremost through the family and it goes on to influence all social relationships, including educational experiences. Habitus helps structure our expectations and aspirations, indicating what is possible for us by outlining what has been achieved by others like us. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, p. 226) contend:

Depending on whether access to higher education is collectively felt, even in a diffuse way, as an impossible, possible, probable, normal or banal future, everything in the conduct of the families and the children (particularly their conduct and performance at school) will vary, because behaviour tends to be governed by what is 'reasonable' to expect.

According to Harker (1984, p. 121) habitus is a 'mediating construct' rather than a 'deterministic one'. For Harker (1984) the following points are central to Bourdieu's notion of habitus:

The need for classes and groups to reproduce themselves  
Certain classes and groups are dominant due to possession of cultural capital. This facilitates their subjugation of other classes.

Normally habitus is employed as a method to analyse dominance and the dominated (McClelland 1990; Reay 2004). For Bourdieu the working class are always the dominated as they are 'constantly obliged to define themselves in terms of the dominant' (1979, p. 41).

Does distance education attract more working class students? Have distance graduates, in Bourdieu's own words, managed to 'find an activity that is entirely 'them' and with it, kindred spirits'? (Bourdieu 1984, p. 223) Such questions will be explored in this research.

### 2.5.2 Critiques of the concept of *habitus*

While habitus is pivotal to Bourdieu's conceptual framework it is probably his 'most contested concept' (Reay 2004, p. 432). Although the habitus allows for diverse action, this action is always 'within the limits of ...the embodied sedimentation of the social structures which produced it' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 19). It is this thinking which leads to criticism of Bourdieu's concept as 'overly reproductionist' (Shilling 2004, p. 479) and deterministic (Jenkins 1992; King 2000; Sullivan 2002). Reay (2004) points out that it was in fact to address the issue of determinism that Bourdieu developed the concept in the first place. Rather than deterministic, Bourdieu contends that habitus simply continues to influence behaviour even though the objective circumstances of its origins are displaced (Bourdieu 2001, p. 13). Habitus is the 'propensity to privilege early experiences' (Bourdieu 1977, p. 77). If we examine the following extract we can see the lengths Bourdieu went to, to ensure that habitus would not be seen as a deterministic concept:

In short, the habitus, the product of history, produces **individual** and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history. The system of dispositions - a past which survives in the present and **tends to** perpetuate itself in the future by making itself present in practices structured according to its principles, an internal law relaying the continuous exercise of the law of external necessities (irreducible to immediate conjunctural constraints) – is the principle of the continuity and regularity which objectivism discerns in the social world without being able to give them a rational basis. And it is at the same time the principle of the **transformations** and regulated **revolutions** which neither the extrinsic and instantaneous determinisms of a mechanistic sociology nor the purely internal but equally punctual determination of voluntarist or spontaneist subjectivism are capable of accounting for (Bourdieu 1977, p. 82-my bold).

Nevertheless, according to critics, (most notably Jenkins 1992; King 2000; Sullivan 2002) the concept of habitus, as applied by Bourdieu, often reverts to objectivism and often 'remains caught in an unresolved contradiction between determinism and voluntarism, with the balance of his (i.e. Bourdieu's) argument favouring the former' (Jenkins 1992, p. 21). McNay (1999, p. 100) identifies that people are 'neither fully determined nor fully willed'. Bathmaker et al. in their study (2013, p. 730) of working class students in traditional higher education, point out that the concept of habitus allows for this, stating that '...some middle-class students have an internalised understanding of the game and play it well without actively considering the mechanisms of their own operations while others operate in a more intentional way.' Reay (2004, p. 437) contends that for Bourdieu 'individuals' adjustments to the external world are all



apparently unconscious, or sub-conscious'. The significant word here is 'apparently' as Reay generally does not concur that the concept is deterministic. According to Reay:

Habitus operates at an unconscious level unless individuals confront events that cause self-questioning, whereupon habitus begins to operate at the level of consciousness and the person develops new facets of the self... (this) can occur during the formation of habitus, and indeed can be constitutive of the habitus (Reay 2004, pp. 437-8).

Sullivan (2002, p. 153) posits that Bourdieu's work is overly complicated, something which she says helps protect it from criticism, as no one can quite understand what he is saying; 'clarity makes a theory amenable to testing, whereas obscurity protects it from falsification'. She points out that the concept of habitus is too all encompassing yet vague to be of any use in empirical research, a criticism also levied against Bourdieu by Brubaker (2004).

Less serious criticisms situate Bourdieu's work firmly and solely in the French context, saying that it is largely only relevant in that field (Sullivan 2001). Bourdieu himself was conscious of this perceived weakness: 'Finally, I realise how much the specificity of the French intellectual field may have contributed to the conception of this book' (Bourdieu 1979, p. xiii). However, the concepts have been used so widely that it is difficult to contend that they do not have a broad application, regardless of their formulation in the French context.

Perhaps a more interesting criticism, and one which holds relevance for my study, stems from the fact that some working class students perform very well in the education system while some privileged students do not (Moore 2004; West et al. 2013). How does Bourdieu explain this? Moore (2004, p. 452) asks; 'if class habitus determines dispositions and competencies for educational success, how can we explain the exceptions to these norms?' Moore contends that the explanation rests with the interactions of two factors: cultural capital and rigour. It is difficult to find a definition for 'rigour' but Bourdieu does relate it to 'social or cultural criteria differentiating sub-groups within a class' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, p. 104). Reay, David and Ball (2005) relate it to holding certain forms of cultural and educational capital deriving from class backgrounds. Bourdieu himself accounts for working class success in university education as the exceptional: 'the experience of the 'wonderboy', miraculously saved by the School' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, p. 227). Bourdieu warns us not to let such 'exceptions' lull us into a false sense of security that the existing rules facilitate equity of access. He was

acutely aware of this phenomenon and 'argued, structurally, that such learners serve to mask systemic inequalities' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, p. 227).

It is difficult to argue with the criticism that Bourdieu's work is enigmatic. Yet mindful of all of the outlined criticisms, Bourdieu's work nevertheless provides a unique insight into the very important phenomenon of class inequality. The concept of habitus adds much to our understanding of society and class relations. King (2000, p. 147) encourages us to think 'with Bourdieu against Bourdieu', a sentiment re-echoed by Brubaker (2004, p. 26). Brubaker (2004, p. 28) criticises Bourdieu for seeing 'tension and conflict in systematic terms' and in so doing cautions us against being too systematic in our application of Bourdieuan theory to the social world, which is itself 'messy, unruly, and in some respects unsystematic' (p. 28). On the other hand Reay (2004, p. 438) contends that the 'indeterminacy' of the concept of habitus means that it is well suited to help us understand the 'messiness of the real world'. Reay (2004, p. 439) interprets habitus not just as a concept, but as a tool to be employed in empirical research. She points out that if we use habitus as a 'conceptual tool' the 'research focus is always broader than the specific focus under study'. Reay (2004) asserts that habitus needs to be 'put into practice in research accounts' rather than simply referenced. In this way habitus becomes a way of working with the data.

Bourdieu (1990a, p.116) contends that a similar habitus can result in different practices depending on the field. Furthermore, it is through 'the workings of habitus that practice (agency) is linked with capital and field (structure)' (Reay 2004, p. 432). We will next consider what Bourdieu had in mind when he developed the concept of *field*.

### **2.5.3 The concept of field**

Bourdieu (1993, p. 72) offers the following definition of field:

...structured spaces of positions (or posts) whose properties depend on their position within these spaces and which can be analysed independently of the characteristics of their occupants (which are partly determined by them)

Grenfell and James (1998, p. 15) assert that while habitus is focused on the subjective, field focuses on the objective. Although habitus and field are connected, they are separate and distinct:

Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 127)

Bourdieu tells us that society consists of autonomous but structurally similar fields (Brubaker 2004, p. 32). But what are they? For Swartz (1997) they are *contexts*, for Reay (2004, p. 432) they are *structures*. For Bok (2010, p. 165) they are 'historically, politically and socially defined context(s) in which people as agents are differently positioned to behave in particular ways'. Swartz and Zolberg (2004) identify Roman Catholicism as a field, while Sapiro (2004) applies the concept to French politics. It is clear that fields are very structured contexts. For Bourdieu higher education is a field (1993). He contends that sub-fields exist within fields: '...for Bourdieu the exact boundaries of fields and sub-fields always remains a contingent question for detailed empirical inquiry rather than a theoretical issue' (Couldry 2004, p. 170).

Fields therefore are specific social spaces with their own established and accepted practices that determine the behaviour of those who engage with that field (Wacquant 1998; Grenfell 2004). Bourdieu (1990a, p. 66) refers to these accepted practices as 'logic of practice' or 'game'. The logic of practice will reflect the interest of the most powerful players in the field, and entry to the field will be subject to acceptance of the rules of the game (Grenfell 2007).

According to Bourdieu education is a field of inequality and higher education in particular is structured in a way which eliminates those not 'shaped to enter the field' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 73). Bourdieu's notion of *dispositions* means that some students' backgrounds prepare them well for university education. West et al. (2013, p. 123) contend: 'the cultures of particular middle class homes may be closer to the habitus of specific universities'. Others, most specifically working class students, must manage to negotiate their way into the field, both socially and academically (Byrom 2009; West et al. 2013). Reay (2004) points out that when habitus comes in contact with a field which is not familiar, transformation can result. For Bourdieu the force that drives the actors in the field is habitus:

The relation between habitus and field operates in two ways. On one side, it is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus, which is the product of the embodiment of the immanent necessity of the field (or of a hierarchy of intersecting fields). On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or cognitive construction: habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense or with value, in which it is worth investing one's energy. (Bourdieu, in Wacquant 1989, p. 44)

Within my research the primary focus is on the internal workings of the field of distance education, a sub-field of higher education. Field research can improve our understanding of distance education graduates: their background, participation experiences, outcomes. My research will augment existing research on non-traditional students in full-time higher education. How have distance students experienced the field of higher education? What demands has the field made on them? With what effect and what outcome?

We have seen how habitus and field are interconnected and that in order for a habitus to invest in a field, the field must have something of value. But within the field, the position and power of an individual is dependent on their holding capital which is, in turn, valued by that field.

Bourdieu points out that 'a field is not a dead structure, a set of 'empty spaces'...but a *space of play* which exists as such only to the extent that players enter into it who believe in and actively pursue the prize it offers' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 19). The prize offered by higher education is the award of degree and resulting access to valued economic, cultural and social capital. Studies have illustrated how traditional higher education is not a level playing field for those from working-class backgrounds, disadvantaged as they are with unequal cultural, social and economic capital on entry (Bathmaker et al. 2013, p. 739). Does distance education present working class students with a more level playing field, one where they recognise that they may be strangers in a strange land (Benn 1995) but that everyone else is in a similar position?

The habitus and the field maintain a relationship of mutual attraction, and the illusion [*illusio*] is determined from the inside, from impulses that push towards self-investment in the object; but it is also determined from the outside, starting with a particular universe of objects offered socially for investment (Bourdieu 1999, p. 512).

For Bourdieu, the *illusio* is the belief that the 'game' we play is worth playing. The 'universe of objects', referred to by Bourdieu, represents various forms of capital. These are discussed in the next section.

#### **2.5.4 The concept of *capital***

Capital, by definition, refers to a valuable resource which can be used to reproduce further valuable resources. Bourdieu (1986) defined it as follows:

Capital is accumulated labour (in its materialized form or its ‘incorporated’, embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour (Bourdieu 1986, p.241).

For Bourdieu (1986) capital refers to any resource which has symbolic value and can act as currency within a particular field. Capital incorporates all forms of power: economic, cultural and social. According to Moore (2004) each form of capital requires some kind of investment and each will deliver some kind of return. Economic, cultural and social capital will be of particular relevance in this research and are explored in more detail below.

*Economic capital* is normally understood to be the financial resources, both wealth and income, available to individuals. Bourdieu contends that while each form of capital has its own specific characteristics ‘economic capital is at their root’ (Bourdieu 1986, p. 252). In addition to underpinning individual freedom, Bourdieu contends that ‘economic capital provides the guarantees which can be the basis of self-assurance, audacity and indifference to profit’ (Bourdieu 1993). According to Bourdieu (1996b, p. 261) ‘economic capital provided the conditions for freedom from economic necessity’. He contends that all other forms of capital derive from economic capital; the investment required to ensure this takes place is ‘great effort of transformation’ (Bourdieu 1986, p. 252).

In their exploration of who is likely to delay college entry in the US, Wells and Lynch (2012, p. 688) identify the importance of family income ‘as a partial representation of financial capital’. A similar situation exists in Ireland (Denny 2010; Lynch 2006; Smyth and McCoy 2009). In the UK, Ball (2003, 2012) argues that those from higher socio-economic backgrounds are better placed to negotiate the supposedly neutral university application apparatus. What role did economic capital play in the educational trajectories of distance graduates? Was their participation in university (distance) education delayed by factors relating to economic capital? These questions will be explored in this research.

In Bourdieu's work the concept of 'capital' was regarded as a resource which could emanate not just from economics but also from culture. With *cultural capital* the investment is education. The return, according to Moore, is the 'formation of a distinctive *habitus* that can equip an individual with embodied social attributes that confer 'distinction'' (Moore 2004, p. 446).

Bourdieu employed the concept of 'cultural capital' in his research on taste, most notably in *Distinction* (1979), but also in his research on education. Bourdieu's work on cultural capital places great emphasis on the transference of advantage and disadvantage from one generation to another, and therefore on social reproduction:

It follows that the transmission of cultural capital is no doubt the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital, and it therefore receives proportionately greater weight in the system of reproduction strategies, as the direct, visible forms of transmission tend to be more strongly censored and controlled (Bourdieu 1986, p. 246).

For Bourdieu cultural capital is: style, language, taste, disposition, social grace etc., which one acquires from family through socialisation as part of the *habitus* (Harker 1984, p. 124). Lamont and Lareau (1988) assert that in order to analyse the effects of cultural capital its content must be specific. They proffer the following definition:

...institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goals and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion (Lamont and Lareau 1988, p. 156)

Dougherty (2003), in a personal correspondence to Lareau and Winnegar (2003, p. 598), points out how markets for cultural capital are constructed by those who already hold specific forms of that capital. Dougherty identified the need to:

theorise the role social groups play in shaping organizations so that they (organizations) will demand certain cultural attributes monopolized by those very groups... A given possession only becomes capital if a market has been constructed in which that possession is demanded and therefore can yield a return (Dougherty 2003).

Because Bourdieu regarded education as the primary driver of social reproduction the concept of cultural capital has had a major impact on studies of inequality in education (Lareau and Weininger 2003). Within the gamut of cultural capital, Bourdieu (1986) specifies the existence of *academic capital* and *educational capital*. Academic capital is in large part determined by

the standing of the academic institution one graduates from and the age at which that takes place (Grenfell 2007). Educational capital relates to 'the subjects studied or grade awarded...' (Bourdieu 1986, p. 168).

Academic success is related to cultural capital so the factors which contribute to such success warrant examination. Theorists often connect the concepts of social class habitus and cultural capital, with many considering parental education and occupation as components of cultural capital (Martin and Spenner 2009; Paulsen and St. John 2002; Wells 2008; Wells and Lynch 2012). Rosksa et al. (2007) found that, all other things being equal, individuals whose parents are college graduates are five times more likely to enter college themselves. Additionally, parents who have themselves completed higher education pass their knowledge and competence in dealing with educational institutions on to their children (Lareau and Weininger 2003).

The identification of specific knowledge about how university 'works' is regularly classified as cultural capital in the literature. Watson (2012, p. 418) connects developing a feel for the 'game' with successful students. Those who recognise that learning at university is often self-directed, those who can master academic language and writing and either see its relevance or accept that it is necessary, those who learn to critically evaluate knowledge, build arguments and for the most part to understand the hidden curriculum (Lynch 1989) are far more likely to succeed. This academic capital Watson (2012) regards as an intrinsic form of cultural capital.

According to Bourdieu (1986) educational institutions reproduce power relations by preferencing middle class cultural norms. Working class people are unaware that *ability* or *talent* are the results of an investment of both time and capital (cultural and economic). Universities perpetuate this myth by alleging that those who perform well are the most gifted, the most intelligent (Bourdieu 1977). The central concept is that culture can, and does, act as capital.

*Social capital* theory has been advanced by many theorists (Bourdieu 1973; Coleman 1994; Field 2008; Portes 1998, 2000; Putman 2000). Bourdieu defines social capital as:

the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 119)

Bourdieu's idea of social capital is linked to his theory on social class. In this way he endeavours to explain why some groups are able to access resources and power in ways that others cannot:

Professionals...invest in their children's education but also and above all in consumer goods capable of symbolising the possession of the material and cultural means of conforming to the rules governing the bourgeois style of life and thereby guaranteeing a social capital or capital of social relationships which will provide useful 'supports' (Bourdieu 1973, p. 93).

Many theorists identify social capital as something which is accrued by relations between individuals. They perceive this form of capital as existing for all individuals, whether privileged or disadvantaged (Coleman 1994; Portes 2002; Putman 2000). Portes (2000, p. 2) synthesises the definition of social capital as 'the benefit accruing to individuals or families by virtue of their ties with others'. Bourdieu's (1986) presentation of the concept is somewhat incomplete in that he identifies valuable social capital as more or less the preserve of prestigious groups. His conceptualisation comes in for some criticism from Field:

Bourdieu's treatment of social capital is somewhat circular; in summary it boils down to the thesis that privileged individuals maintain their position by using their connections with other privileged people. Coleman's view is more nuanced in that he discerns the value of connections for all actors, individual and collective, privileged and disadvantaged. But Coleman's view is also naively optimistic; as a public good, social capital is almost entirely benign in its functions, providing for a set of norms and sanctions that allow individuals to cooperate for mutual advantage and with little or no 'dark side'. Bourdieu's usage of the concept, by contrast, virtually allows only for a dark side for the oppressed, and a bright side for the privileged (Field 2008, p. 31).

Murphy (2011, p. 103) also draws our attention to the importance of the 'relational' as a theoretical concept in sociology, particularly in the work of Bourdieu who highlights the relational facets of class. He criticises Bourdieu for being light on his analysis of the emotional aspects of family and community relationships. Murphy asserts that there is a need to explore more fully 'the importance of relations and relationships to people's educational and class trajectories' (p. 104). Murphy emphasises the importance of horizontal as well as vertical relationships asserting that while Bourdieu examines the relations between social positions he does not examine the substance of these positions.

Feinstein et al. (2008, p. 22), in their work on the wider benefits of learning, suggest the following:



*While those with lower socio-economic status and limited education tend to have access to higher levels of bonding social capital, allowing them to use their social networks protectively, they tend to have less access to bridging and linking social capital. The reverse is generally true for individuals with higher SES.*

According to Feinstein et al. (2008, p. 22) bonding capital is the 'most basic form of social capital' and is used to augment the homogeneity and confidence of a social group. Bridging capital is also horizontal; it extends beyond the group but to similar groups. Linking capital is different; it is about making vertical connections with influential individuals and/or institutions.

Watson (2012, p. 422) reflecting on what Bourdieu (1986, p. 110) calls the 'multiplier effect', illustrates how social capital emanating from social networks acts as a 'powerful mechanism' to facilitate students acquisition of important cultural capital. Watson identifies the concept of 'likeminded people' and highlights the importance of students finding others like themselves in higher education. Bathmaker et al. (2013, p. 727) echo Watson's findings in identifying how working class students in traditional full-time higher education spend a good deal of time 'finding like-minded people' and less time participating in extra-curricular activities. Wells and Lynch (2013, p. 687) report that: 'having college-bound peers may be another form of advantaged cultural capital because peers help to form a student's habitus'. Other studies have shown that the more students can recreate their social class habitus in higher education the more likely they are to feel at home and persist (Ball 2003; Field and Morgan-Klein 2013; Subotzky and Prinsloo 2011; Thomas 2002; Watson 2012). Bourdieu contends:

..groups mobilized on the basis of a secondary criterion (such as sex or age) are likely to be bound together less permanently and less deeply than those mobilized on the basis of the fundamental determinants of their condition (e.g. groups possessing a real social identity/determinations constituting a class condition) (Bourdieu 1979, p. 107).

However, while social solidarity is important, Watson (2012) explains how networks, which were made up solely of marginalised students, were not as valuable as mixed networks. This is reiterated in Espinoza's US study (2012, p. 23) where she claims 'elements of a high socio economic status (SES) habitus are learned by low SES students through contact with faculty and other individuals in higher education settings'. For Bourdieu (1986) social capital is not only a function of the size of the social group but also of the existing portfolio of capital already held by each member of the group; 'Bringing together on a single site a population homogeneous in its dispossession strengthens that dispossession' (Bourdieu 1999, p. 129). The implication is

that in order for an individual to accrue valuable social capital someone in their social group must hold it.

How do successful distance students accrue capital from their social networks, both inside and outside their courses? This theme will be examined in this research.

### **2.5.5 Critics of the concept of *capital***

We have seen how Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus is contested. His conceptualisation of capital too has its critics, with the concept of cultural capital coming in for most criticism.

Many theorists question the link between cultural capital and academic performance (Broderick and Hubbard 2000; Di Maggio 1982; Farkas et al. 1990; Kingston 2001; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999). Farkas et al. (1990) in their study of school children found that students who worked hard and had good basic ability performed better than those who did not. No other variable made any significant difference. Building on this study Kingston (2001, p. 88) argues that cultural capital theory (Bourdieu calls it a 'concept' rather than a 'theory') does not 'fully explain the connection between social privilege and academic success.' He argues that hard work is not a cultural resource. Neither, according to Kingston, are books, which he classifies as learning resources. According to Kingston, to call such resources 'cultural' is unhelpful. Critiquing a study by Kalmijn and Kraaykamp (1996, pp. 32-33) Kingston asserts that:

..any analysis of educational outcomes that excludes ability cannot confirm Bourdieu's (1973) theory of cultural reproduction nor establish that cultural capital may also serve as a route to upward mobility for less privileged groups in society (Kingston 2001, p.94).

Kingston (2001, p. 94) asserts that there is 'no convincing evidence that class-based differences in cultural capital endowments-largely defined in terms of 'elite' artistic orientation-explain why socially advantaged students do better in school in the United States'. Critiquing how cultural capital theory suggests the causal mechanism is deep involvement in cultural activities, Kingston (2001, p. 94) points out how the cultural capital effect could also be associated with:

- Family based processes e.g. parenting style, extra tuition in academic subjects
- Personality dispositions e.g. perseverance

The central tenet of Kingston's argument is that cultural capital alone cannot account for the connection between economic advantage and academic success.

Di Maggio (1982) promoted a cultural mobility model, implying that cultural capital can be held by anyone and can facilitate anyone's academic achievements. According to Di Maggio this contrasts with Bourdieu's idea that cultural capital underpins the socialisation patterns of the elite. But on reflection maybe they are not mutually exclusive. 'Elite' circles can exist in any class. Perhaps Bourdieu's use of the term 'elite' is being interpreted too narrowly in this instance.

Broderick and Hubbard (2000) examined the underlying assumption (in their view) in Bourdieu's work that the education system in general and teachers more specifically, value more highly students from elite cultural backgrounds. They found this not to be the case. They noted however that the teachers in their study held varying levels of cultural capital. Although there was a substantial relationship between socio economic status and grades, it could not be accounted for by cultural capital. So, according to Broderick and Hubbard (2000) teachers do not fulfil the role assigned to them by cultural capital theory. Espinoza (2012, p. 31) concurs with this stating that students who lack social capital benefit from relationships with teachers who possess it. This relationship often results in working class students developing 'college-going identities'.

Despite such criticisms, Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital, in all manifestations, has made a significant contribution to the literature, both theoretical and empirical (Sullivan 2001).

## 2.6 Bourdieu and distance education

The title of this section is perhaps misleading, as I can find no specific reference in Bourdieu's writing to distance education per se. Bourdieu does write about part-time education however, and was acutely aware of the role played by part-time education in the lives of the French working and lower middle classes. In *Distinction* (1979) he makes specific reference to the Centre National des Arts et Metiers (CNAM), an institution which offered night classes to people who wanted to improve their employment prospects in order to 'get on' (p. 334).

It seems unlikely that a scholar of Bourdieu's calibre was unaware of distance education (the UK Open University delivered their first courses in 1970, a period when Bourdieu's own work on education and social reproduction was at its peak). It is more likely that Bourdieu may have regarded distance education, if he thought about it at all, in the same way that he considered part-time education i.e. as a structure created to appease the working classes, something which the socially advantaged could point to in order to ease their conscience, but which would never solve the fundamental problems of social inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). At best, Bourdieu may have regarded distance education as one of the contradictions in higher education, at once appearing to address inequality and at the same time reproduce it. At worst, he may have regarded it as a veil for institutionalised inequality: a form of symbolic violence.

This section will concentrate on the relevance of Bourdieu's work to distance education, drawing on his references to democratisation of higher education and delayed participation as appropriate.

### 2.6.1 The democratisation of higher education

Bourdieu was critical of assertions in the 1990s that higher education was becoming democratized; pointing out that *increasing* participation did not mean *widening* participation:

For the benefit of those who conclude from the growth in the total number of students in higher education that there has been a 'democratization' of faculty intake, it must be pointed out that this morphological phenomenon may correspond to a perpetuation of the status quo or even, in certain cases, to a decline in the representation of the disadvantaged classes as well as to a broadening of the social base of admission (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, p. 223).

For Bourdieu 'democratization' of higher education would only be meaningful when working class students had the same aspirations for higher education as their middle and upper class peers and the same statistical likelihood regarding not only timely entry to higher education but also course and institutional choice and employment outcomes. This should be their 'typical future', not just one preserved for the exceptional student (Bourdieu used the term 'wonderboy'), who was then held up as an example of what was possible (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, p. 227). Bourdieu defined democratisation as 'perfect equality of opportunity presupposing that all sub-categories should have a rate of opportunity equal to the overall rate of enrolment for that age group (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, p. 223).

Certainly, when Bourdieu addresses the 'increasing participation' in the higher education agenda, popular in the 1990s, he is critical of how disadvantage is reproduced, arguing that working class students, if they do progress to higher education at the end of compulsory education, are more likely to participate in low status courses or/at low status institutions:

In short, the lower a student's social origin, the more his access to higher education has to be paid for by a restriction on choice.... It may be concluded that the slight improvement in working-class children's chances of entering university has in a sense been offset by a strengthening of the mechanism tending to relegate the survivors into certain faculties ...(Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, p. 229/230).

Bourdieu's comments are as relevant now as they were in 1990; working class students, if they enter higher education at all, continue to be more likely to complete lower status courses (Astin 1975, 1993; Espinoza 2012; Fleming and Finnegan 2011; McCoy et al. 2014b; Paulsen and St. John 2002; Tinto 1993). The effects of working class students completing lower status courses are multiple and interrelated. In the first instance if working class students simply complete low status courses, the social status quo is effectively maintained. Secondly, as low status courses typically have a low value in the market place they can be ineffectual in bestowing capital. Thirdly, because lower level courses have a low value in the labour market, the possibility of economic mobility from such courses is often slight. Finally, because those with honours degree qualifications, or higher, find it easiest to obtain employment, low status courses are often presented as the gateway to higher, more prestigious academic qualifications. However, the extra time involved in this circuitous route to high level courses acts as a delaying mechanism for working class students who must finally obtain the higher

award in order to improve their prospects. This delay can impact negatively on the accumulation of valuable capital.

### **2.6.2 Delayed participation**

Bourdieu was vocal in his criticism of any form of delayed participation in higher education, or participation that prolonged completion, stating that any delay in the transformation of educational capital into other forms of capital (e.g. economic or cultural) negatively impacted those involved:

The discrepancy between educational capital and the cultural capital actually possessed, which is the source of differences between holders of identical education capital, can also result for the fact that the same educational qualification may correspond to schooling of very unequal duration (i.e. there is unequal conversion of scholastically acquired cultural capital). (Bourdieu 1979, p. 82)

For Bourdieu, delayed or prolonged participation in higher education impacted negatively on one's ability to accrue cultural capital from the engagement:

Thus, scholastic age (i.e. age at a given educational level) is a transformed form of inherited cultural capital, and lost years are a step towards relegation or elimination (Bourdieu 1979, p. 104/5).

As distance education is a form of delayed or extended participation in higher education, we can meaningfully infer what Bourdieu might have thought about distance education from his writing on part-time HE.

Bourdieu acknowledged that conventional university education was not accessible to everyone. This idea underpins his theory of social reproduction. Yet he also understood the desire for recognition working class people can feel: the desire to improve their social status and 'get on'. Bourdieu hailed from a working class background; his father was a postal worker and his mother a housewife (Oxford Bibliographies 2014). He was himself a working class 'wonderboy' of exceptional intelligence, achieving great success in the world of academia. As such Bourdieu understood both the cost and benefits of social mobility.

Bourdieu emphasises the importance of time in providing a theoretical level which can account for change (Harker 1984, p. 119). It is 'time' which can facilitate transformation. According to Harker (1984, p. 120) habitus is not static, rather it is re-constructed in each generation from two origins; firstly, the habitus of the socialising individuals or 'agents':

Between the child and the world the whole group intervenes.., with a whole universe of ritual practices and also of discourses, sayings, proverbs, all structured in concordance with the principles of the corresponding habitus (Bourdieu 1977, p. 167).

Secondly, the objective conditions of the material and social environment which are subject to change over time:

The habitus is constantly being formed in the daily practices of individual subjects.., and while it is a structured system of meanings it does not follow any mechanistic formal or 'algebraic' logic. People do not simply reproduce their meaning systems, they also produce and use them. One must see classes and their members not just as actors in a prefabricated play but also as creative subjects (Sulkunin 1982, pp. 109-110).

While time impedes transformation it can also facilitate it. Those who complete higher education in a timely manner, progressing in the normal timeframe from second to third level, stand the best chance of leveraging capital from their participation and successful completion. Working class students are, according to Bourdieu, less likely to progress in this timely manner. What impact does a delay in acquiring a university degree have on ones' ability to leverage capital from that degree? Are 'lost years a step toward relegation or elimination'? (Bourdieu 1979, p. 105) Is Bourdieu right? These questions will be investigated in this research.

Although Bourdieu's conceptual framework has much to offer in helping us understand why students participate in part-time/distance education and the effect of such participation on their lives in general, and employability in particular, it is, as a model, underutilised in part-time/distance education.

## **2.7 Summary and research issues**

In this chapter I have outlined the main tenets of Bourdieu's social reproduction theory, specifically his conceptual framework of *habitus*, *field* and *capital*. *Habitus* operates as a system of internalized dispositions that mediate between human agency and social structures (Brubaker 2004). *Field* represents a social system operating with its own rules. *Capital* is accrued by those who can enter the field, know the rules and play 'the game' (Bathmaker et al. 2013, p. 730). The core contention of Bourdieu's theory is that the field of higher education is a vehicle for the reproduction of both privilege and disadvantage. According to Bourdieu, in the quest to acquire the various forms of capital valued for success, delayed participation in university education is 'a step towards relegation or elimination' (Bourdieu 1979, p. 104/5). Bourdieu at once addresses and dismisses the idea of the democratization of higher education,

outlining how society, wittingly or unwittingly, confuses increasing participation with widening participation.

Despite many criticisms, Bourdieu's work is extremely important as it provides us with a framework to critically evaluate higher education. It helps to explain the relative absence of some groups from the higher education arena. As such, his conceptual framework affords great possibilities to shape a study of part-time distance university education and to analyse the emerging data.

Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus, field and capital continues to have relevance for research in access and participation in all manifestations of higher education, but particularly by participation of non-traditional students and most particularly by working class students. It is within the framework of online distance university education that I seek to appropriate Bourdieu's tools and apply them to explore the role distance education plays in facilitating educational opportunity, the student experience of educative success and ultimately individual transformation.

We know that Bourdieu's examination of intra-class division did not focus on the working classes. Espinoza (2012, p. 26) urges us to explore 'the dynamic and adaptive character of the habitus'. What can my study add to what we already know about the 'dynamic and adaptive' habitus which results in working class students' educational success? And what impact does prolonged or delayed participation have on employability? What happens next to academically successful distance graduates? These are questions which I will explore in the context of this research project.



### **3 Non-traditional graduates - the existing body of knowledge**

There is vast and indisputable evidence that educational success is unevenly distributed by social class (Iannelli 2011; OECD 2013; Sutton Trust 2010; Thomas and Quinn 2007). Additionally, there is substantial evidence to disprove deficit models i.e. that intellectual ability is unevenly distributed by class (Kincheloe 2008; McNamee and Miller 2009). We know from social reproduction theory that factors other than economics can prevent, delay or otherwise impact on participation in, and completion of, higher education (HE). Social and cultural factors too have a profound influence (Nesbit 2005, p. 5). However, some working class and mature individuals do complete HE. The discourse around higher education participation claims that it leads to greater employment opportunities and long-term financial and social benefits (Bathmaker et al. 2013; Iannelli 2011; OECD 2013). A question arises as to whether this is true for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those who participate later in life. This chapter will examine the literature on non-traditional graduates in the light of three key experiential phases: pre-participation, participation and post-participation.

#### **3.1 Literature review methodology**

In order to undertake this research I completed a traditional scoping review of the literature, employing a systematic approach. The purpose of the *scoping review* is to identify and assess what is already known regarding the research topic. I developed a comprehensive search string consisting of key search terms for both distance graduates and non-traditional graduates more broadly.

My initial search focused on distance graduates. However, the dearth of literature necessitated scoping the literature on non-traditional graduates more broadly, focusing on two specific categories, namely, adults and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Given the limited number of distance studies, it can be assumed that relatively little is known about undergraduate, distance alumni, particularly in Europe. As far as I can ascertain, no research of this nature has been conducted in Ireland.

Thereafter, I identified other inclusion and exclusion criteria. I was interested only in those who had graduated with an undergraduate degree from higher education. In terms of time span I limited the search to work published since 2004 although some seminal work predates this.

Additionally, I limited the search to work published in English. I searched for peer-reviewed, published journal articles, conference proceedings, doctoral dissertations and institutional reports. The key domains for this particular research topic are Education and Sociology.

At the time of writing (2015), neither HEA nor OECD reports document the socio-economic background of those who successfully graduate from higher education despite the fact that successful completion is now regarded as a fundamental indicator of access, and socio-economic status is a well-established predictor of participation.

There are important differences between those who complete degrees on a full time, part-time and distance basis. Specifically, those who participate on a part-time or distance basis inevitably take longer to complete their degree and are likely to have a (pre)existing employment profile. Where studies have specified that they have included part-time and full-time graduates, I have made this explicit.

The majority of research is quantitative in nature. Quantitative research is important, especially when it is derived from independently reported data from official data sources, as is the case with most of the studies reviewed. Such data is more likely to be an accurate reflection of employment status or earnings. Self-reported data, on the other hand, can often be inaccurate as individuals may, consciously or unconsciously, misrepresent information. However, the dearth in the number of qualitative studies impacts on the availability of rich, deep data, particularly in relation to the lived experience of graduates.

## **3.2 The pre-participation experience of non-traditional graduates**

The literature offers some insights regarding how the choices individuals make prior to attending higher education can influence their experience as graduates.

### **3.2.1 Causes or reasons?**

Research identifies families of origin of successful working class students as largely respectable working class, where education is valued, aspirations are high and the hope and possibility of a better future is voiced (Bathmaker et al. 2013; Halsey 2013; Jackson and Marsden 1962; Reay 2013).

Most importantly, in almost all cases of working class participation, the initial barrier to working class ambition to participate in higher education was ameliorated by public funding (Halsey 2013; Jackson and Marsden 1962; Reay 2013).

Reay (2013, p. 669/670) and Halsey (2013) in attempting to understand their own educative experiences also identify the importance of luck and personal determination, what Reay classifies as 'a stubborn single-mindedness' (Reay 2013, p. 669/670). Espinoza (2012) notes that teachers are often central to students (re)envisioning a future for themselves in higher education.

We know from the literature that those from lower socio economic backgrounds are more likely to delay their entry to higher education (Cabrera and La Nasa 2001; Fitzgerald 2004; Furlong 2010; Wells and Lynch 2012). This may relate to concerns about participation transmitted through social class habitus. For example, issues can arise around understanding the college application process, the funding process and funding issues more generally.

It is no surprise then that mature graduates, are more likely than young graduates to hail from a working class background (Chesters and Watson 2014; Egerton 2000; Purcell et al. 2007). Mature-age graduates in the Chesters and Watson (2014) Australian study were more likely to: reside in less-advantaged areas, be the first person in their family to attend university, have family commitments, and have experienced a delay in their participation in higher education resulting from their socio-economic background.

While mature graduates are often intrinsically motivated by an interest in the course topic, they are overridingly interested in enhancing their employment opportunities (Coelli, Tabasso and Zakirova 2012; Purcell et al. 2007; Redmond 2006; Siivonen and Isopahkala-Bouret 2014). This is particularly true for those actively involved in employment or those seeking employment (Coelli, Tabasso and Zakirova 2012; Siivonen and Isopahkala-Bouret 2014; Woodley and Wilson 2002). Adults consider objective returns such as income, job status and job security and subjective returns such as the likelihood of successful completion when considering their participation in HE. Weighted against these are the costs of participation both actual, such as fees, books, travel etc. and opportunity costs which might involve loss of overtime pay, intrusion on family/social time, fear of failure and resulting loss of self-esteem and/or social status.

Credential inflation too can have an impact on older graduates who feel they must upgrade their qualifications in order to sustain labour market competitiveness (Woodley and Wilson 2002). Credential inflation occurs when individuals are led to believe that higher levels of education are required in order to obtain certain jobs regardless of whether those jobs require higher levels of skills (Chesters 2014a; McLean and Rollwagen 2010; Van de Werfhorst 2007). Credential inflation is often associated with the massification of higher education.

### **3.2.2 Institutional choice**

There is much evidence from the US, Scotland, the UK, and Ireland to suggest that participation by non-traditional students in higher education is characterised by attendance at less elite<sup>7</sup> or non-university third level institutions (Alon 2009; Engle and Tinto 2008; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Gallacher 2009; Ianelli 2011; Smyth and McCoy 2009; Sutton Trust 2010; Woodfield 2011). In Ireland the abolition of university tuition fees for undergraduates in 1996 facilitated middle class families to invest more heavily in second level education (Lynch 2006) and results in an uneven competition for university places (Denny 2010).

However, it is not always the case that working class students end up being out-performed in the competition for university. In the UK, the Sutton Trust (2008, p. 1) identify how:

...many students from non-privileged backgrounds with high exam grades do not end up at research led universities...it is difficult to pinpoint why this is so, but it is certainly connected to the young people's aspirations and the quality of the advice they receive.

Why do well-qualified working class students opt for less elite institutions? The literature provides some answers.

Working class students may lack the confidence to apply for elite institutions (Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Reay, 2001). Students understandably apply for institutions where they will feel most comfortable; where they will meet others like themselves (Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Reay 2001; Redmond, 2006). Additionally, limited financial resources result in working-class students selecting institutions on the basis of proximity to the parental home, rather than institutional status (Cullinan et al. 2013; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Greenbank and Hepworth

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<sup>7</sup> The term *elite or prestigious institution* is used throughout the sociology of education literature to indicate institutions which are ranked highly in national and international league tables. Its use in this thesis is in no way intended to equate to *better*.

2008; McGloin 2007; Redmond 2006). This saves accommodation and transport costs and so limits borrowing. Redmond (2006) construed this as meaning that they gave little careful consideration to the choices open to them. I would argue that convenience and the prospect of 'fitting in' are key factors in persistence, and may indicate a considered thought process rather than the lack of one.

Financial concerns also result in students applying for institutions where courses will be shorter; almost inevitably less elite institutions. Considerations as to whether they will be able to work while studying are also important. Furlong and Cartmel (2005) found that elite universities were more likely to schedule classes in a manner which makes part-time employment for students more difficult.

There is a body of evidence to suggest that those who attend less prestigious institutions are subsequently disadvantaged in the labour market (Brewer and Ehrenberg 1996; Brine and Waller 2004; Hussain et al. 2009; Ordine and Rose 2015; Osbourne et al. 2004; Purcell et al. 2007; Redmond 2006; Smetherham 2006a). Callender and Brown (2003) estimate that in the competition for "fast track" [quickly advancing] jobs, graduates from Oxford or Cambridge have a 1 in 8 chance of success while graduates from post-1992 universities face odds of 1 in 235.

More recent research has somewhat moved away from this view. Woodfield (2011) studied mature graduates who had completed an honours degree in UK universities in 2006 (8% had studied part-time). Her research found that university type did not impact on graduate employment outcomes. Neither did classification of award. Woodfield suggests that her findings may relate to data treatment; for example, she defines graduate employment success as: paid graduate level employment whether full-time, part-time or self-employed. Woodfield's findings are interesting as they represent a movement away from the discourse of disadvantage often surrounding mature graduates. Significantly, where mature graduates have attended institutions particularly suited to their needs (the Open University and Birkbeck are specified), their outcomes are enhanced (Feinstein et al. 2007; Woodfield 2011; Woodley and Wilson 2002).

### 3.2.3 Course choice

Social class has a strong impact on course choice in higher education (Allen et al. 2012; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Fleming and Finnegan 2011; Ianelli 2007, 2011; Ianelli et al. 2008) with working class students more regularly choosing lower level courses (Fleming and Finnegan 2011; McCoy et al. 2014). Many elite universities offer four year degree programmes, sometimes longer, rather than the three year ordinary degrees commonplace at institutions of technology or further education colleges (Watson 2013). This is an important consideration for non-traditional students who often embark on higher education in more stringent financial circumstances (Furlong and Cartmel 2005). While honours degrees, in particular high status vocational degrees (for example Engineering and Medicine) are regarded as more valuable in the labour market (Blasko et al. 2002; Forfas 2013; Naylor et al. 2002; OECD 2015), they take longer to complete.

Work placements often form part of honours degrees. While within-course work experience provides graduates with valuable capital it also extends the timeframe for degree completion. Additionally, work placements can have hidden costs such as travel expenses, clothing expenses and possibly even accommodation costs. This can militate against non-traditional students choosing courses which involve work placements (Allen et al. 2012).

The importance of the subject studied in the labour market outcomes of graduates is highlighted by a number of researchers (Birch et al. 2009; Blasko et al. 2002; Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2011; Chodry et al. 2010; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Jacob, Klein and Ianelli 2015; McGuinness 2003; Naylor et al. 2002; Smyth and Strathdee 2010; Woodfield 2011). The literature refers to 'elite' degrees as those which lead to 'elite' employment, that is, employment with the best labour market outcomes in terms of highest salary, best working conditions and best opportunities for advancement. Because such degrees often take a long time to complete or involve hidden or obvious extra costs, they do not tend to attract non-traditional students. Evidence from both Australia (Birch et al. 2009), New Zealand (Smyth and Strathdee 2010) and the UK (McGuinness 2003) found that the subject studied, rather than the institution at which the study was completed, is more likely to be a key determinant of future earnings.

Underpinning the importance of subject matter is an acknowledgement of the fact that disadvantaged groups are often 'locked out of gaining qualifications that hold out the promise of gaining a well-paid job' (Smyth and Strathdee 2010, p. 505). Non-traditional students may enter HE with limited course choice due to low academic attainment at second level (often resulting from structural inequalities experienced earlier in life (Denny 2010; Furlong and Cartmel 2005). Additionally, they may have obtained limited advice re course selection, with parents unable to offer guidance in this regard (Chen and Carroll 2005). Jacob, Kelin and Ianelli (2015) found that having highly educated parents plays a significant role in how graduates select their field of study. Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2011) illustrate that there is a significant social class difference in various occupational outcomes. In the final analysis field of study is emerging as one of the most significant predictors of labour market success and consequent improved social mobility.

Part-time university education is under-developed in Ireland. Additionally, few elite courses are offered on a part-time/distance basis. Part-time students have very little choice to individualise and accommodate their specific labour market needs or individual strengths or interests, let alone gain an elite vocational degree.

In sum, educational expansion has not achieved equity of access to HE. Public policy plays a critical role in this arena. Social selection takes place both in terms of eligibility to enter HE and differentiation of HE systems selected. This relates to what Lucas (2001) calls 'effectively maintained inequality'.

### **3.3 The HE participation experience of non-traditional graduates**

#### **3.3.1 Academic attainment**

Academic attainment can impact on labour market performance and whether graduates obtain graduate level employment (Connor et al. 2004; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; McGuinness 2003). Some studies found that social class had a strong impact on the likelihood of students completing their degrees (Ishitani 2006; Powdthavee and Vignoles 2009) and on the classification of the award obtained (Connor et al. 2004; Furlong and Cartmel 2005) with working class students performing less well than their middle class peers. However, Carroll (2011) found that the academic attainment of the mature working class graduates (of full-time HE) in her study reflected that of the overall student body. Studies have found that academic results are very important when shortlisting candidates for employment (Morely 2007; Stuart et al. 2009); most employers regarded a 2:1 honours degree as the minimum entry requirement to jobs in their organisations. However, Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) found that working class students focused on academic attainment to the exclusion of extra-curricular activities. This finding mirrors that of Redmond (2006, p. 128) who found that this practice often alienates them from other students which in turn impacts negatively on their integration. In general the evidence relating low academic attainment to non-traditional graduates is weak.

Individuals who have already participated in higher education are more likely to have successful encounters with additional education experiences; a phenomenon more generally referred to as the Matthew effect (Blossfield et al. 2014; Chesters 2014a). This finding is important as it indicates that students are likely to be successful if they return to study later in order to build on existing qualifications.

#### **3.3.2 Economic capital**

While financial constraints are a barrier to entering higher education they also impact on the participation experience. Due to the increasing costs associated with higher education participation many of those attending third level have a part-time job and often work long hours (Engle and Tinto 2008; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Moreau and Leathwood 2006). Engle and Tinto (2008, p. 3), in their study of US first-generation students, found that unmet financial



needs caused first-generation students to engage in employment to an extent that damaged their chances of successful completion. Because of work-commitments outside higher education, non-traditional students often have disrupted progression through higher education: repeating exams or deferring participation (Byrom and Lightfoot 2013; Furlong and Cartmel 2005). In all of these ways the participation of full time non-traditional students mirrors the protracted participation pathways of many distance students (Simpson 2002; Woodley 2004).

While some studies have found that working alongside studying leads to lower levels of academic attainment (CIPD 2006) not all studies reached this conclusion. Mounsey et al. (2013) found no difference in the grade point between working and non-working full time university students. Other studies (Applegate and Daly 2006; Kosi et al. 2013; Ryan et al. 2011) indicate that while part-time work can impact on stress levels, limited hours (the study specifies up to 20 hours per week) of work do not impact significantly on academic attainment and can, in certain circumstances, specifically if the work relates to the course of study, enhance academic attainment.

Students are often required to complete work placements as part of their undergraduate degree. In the past such work placements have been unpaid. More recently the introduction of paid work placements has been an important development for non-traditional students (Pedagogy for Employability Group 2007). However, many studies identify patterns of inequality in students' experience of work placements (Allen et al. 2012; Jonsson et al. 2009; Lehmann 2012; Swartz 2008). Work placements often involve a selection process, with the top performing students most likely to be selected. This can militate against working class students. Additionally, the hidden costs of work placements can make them unattractive to working class students (Greenbank and Hepworth 2008). This can impact negatively on the outcomes for non-traditional graduates. For example, Mendez and Rona (2010) found that graduates who completed work placements as part of their programme of study achieved a higher classification in their final award.

### 3.3.3 Social capital

Working class students in HE tend to be occupied with fitting in (Stuart et al. 2009) and are more inclined to be present orientated (Stevenson and Clegg 2010). They do not spend time on extra-curricular activities which could be 'easily repackaged as valuable capital in the future' (Bathmaker et al. 2013, p. 734), for example something they could usefully put in a curriculum vitae. In a challenged economic environment graduates must have an additional set of attributes, together with work experience, in order to move and stay ahead of the competition for jobs (Bathmaker et al. 2013; Engle and Tinto 2008; Moss 2005). Echoing Bourdieu's conceptualisation of higher education participation as a 'game', Bathmaker et al. (2013) examine how aware working class students are of the rules of the 'game' and how the 'game' itself is changing. Their study focuses on the importance of extra-curricular activities in developing competencies which allow students to play a more successful game. However, the working class students in Bathmaker's study were sufficiently out of their comfort zone by simply studying at university. An additional challenge, such as accumulating valuable social capital, was not what they wanted. This finding echoes that of Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) who found that working class students simply did not understand that graduate employers might value this type of extra-curricular experience.

Another important implication of non-participation in extra-curricular activities is that the voice of non-traditional students is often not heard in student organisations, for example the Student's Union. This has, according to Stuart et al. (2009) implications for the representativeness of these organisations. Skills in political manoeuvring, self-promotion and social networking, often acquired in university clubs and societies and regularly required in the workplace, are regularly passed over by working class students (Lubrano 2004). If non-traditional students do not engage in the middle class college environments they will struggle to engage in the middle class work environment (Olson, 2014).

The mature graduates in Redmond's (2006) UK study rarely participated in the extra-curricular aspects of college life and remained by and large like 'fish out of water'. They failed to 'embody the culture and traditions of higher education' (p. 121). This was often due to economic and time constraints and also to family commitments. This lack of engagement also alienated them from other students which in turn impacted negatively on their integration.

An important aspect of extra-curricular activities is career planning (Carroll 2011; Little 2006; Miller et al. 2008; Ward et al. 2007). Much of the research indicates that non-traditional graduates, both working class and mature, lack a propensity to plan, particularly in relation to career management (Bathmaker et al. 2013; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Greenbank and Hepworth 2008; Purcell et al. 2007; Redmond 2006; Stuart et al. 2009; Stevenson and Clegg 2010).

The mature graduates in Carroll's (2011) Irish study identified how they developed 'awareness in retrospect' of what they could have done better. This included early career planning, gaining work experience in relevant professional environments and, consequently, establishing networks in relevant professional environments. Redmond (2006) contends that non-traditional students think in terms of 'jobs' rather than 'careers' and proffers this as a reason why they remain ambivalent to the HE 'career' service. The working class students in the Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study were either totally unaware of the career service or misunderstood its function, seeing it as something which helped with career choice but not realising it could help with the recruitment and selection process.

However, Brooks and Everett (2008) reveal something different. They found that younger graduates from lower socio economic groups are more inclined, than their more privileged peers, to engage in strategic life planning. The researchers suggest this is because those from more privileged backgrounds possess 'a strong sense of ontological security' which makes them resist personal responsibility to plan their futures. The authors point out that 'the social capital and high-status qualifications offered by universities such as Oxbridge and London cannot, in all cases, compensate for an unwillingness to plan' (p. 334).

Within a mass higher education system competition for graduate level jobs is intense and graduates need to be able to move efficiently to avail of opportunities (Carroll 2011). While non-traditional students need to be pro-active in planning their futures, institutions too need to develop strategies to enhance outcomes for non-traditional graduates (Carroll 2011). This might include highlighting the value of their life experiences (Thomas and Jones 2007), encouraging them to engage with the career service as early as possible and connecting them with other successful non-traditional alumni (Carroll 2011; Little 2006). As the number of non-traditional graduates increases, matching new graduates with non-traditional alumni will

become easier (Carroll 2011). However, it is important to be mindful of the fact that non-traditional graduates do not necessarily categorise themselves as 'non-traditional' and may not welcome being targeted for particular forms of assistance (Luykx and Heyman 2013). Raising the awareness of all students to employability issues will enhance the outcomes for everyone. However, universities face considerable resource constraints. This too is a consideration in any solution.

### **3.3.4 The lived experience of participation**

Non-traditional students in higher education often exist in a liminal state and this is particularly pertinent when it comes to their relationships with others (Field and Morgan-Klein 2013; West et al. 2013). According to Byrom and Lightfoot (2013, p. 814) 'a working class habitus requires transformation in order for an individual to fit into middle-class contexts'. West et al. (2013) found that working class full-time students had difficulty talking with tutors. The authors identified this as difficulty in establishing their position within the field and difficulty with taking for granted that they had a right to do so.

Social networks and indeed family relationships of non-traditional students often come under pressure. While many studies identify the importance of the role of supportive parents (Jackson and Marsden 1962; Steedman 1986; Mahan 2010; Halsey 2013; Byrom and Lightfoot 2013; Reay 2013) other studies outline how first-generation students struggle to find support at home (Field and Morgan-Kleins 2013; Miller 2008; West et al. 2013). In these studies participants often commented that their parents did not have the cultural capital to support them, as they were unfamiliar with the field of higher education. Conflict between individual aspirations and family aspirations de-rail some students and cause them to change course or withdraw (Byrom and Lightfoot 2013). Working class students recognise that they needed to find a group where they belonged in order to garner the personal capital to keep going (Bathmaker et al. 2013).

Mature graduates outline how their personal relationships often came under pressure with partners experiencing sentiments of jealousy and insecurity; 'reports emerged of numerous marital breakdowns' (Redmond 2006, p. 126). A sense of solitude is often associated with mature students as they do not fit the image of the typical undergraduate (Brine and Waller

2004; Hinton-Smith 2012; Redmond 2006). It is hardly surprising then that mature students tend to have higher levels of non-completion (York 2001).

Non-traditional students face significant risks when they participate in HE. They more regularly access lower status institutions and courses (Fleming and Finnegan 2011; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Ianelli 2011). They often struggle to fit in with their more advantaged peers (Furlong and Cartmel, 2005) and into a middle class institutional habitus (Bathmaker et al. 2013; Espinoza 2012; Reay 2013; West et al. 2013). Additionally, they are less likely to successfully complete (Powdthavee and Vignoles 2009). Importantly, findings from an Irish study (Moran 2015) indicate that part-time students were less likely to feel excluded in their class, but more likely to feel excluded by the institution.

The next section will explore the experiences of those who do successfully complete. Overall, dynamics of structure and agency are somewhat underexplored in the literature on non-traditional graduates. Notably, little is known about the participation experience of part-time HE graduates.

### **3.4 The non-traditional graduate experience**

Elias and Purcell (2011, p. 19) write that within the UK, the proportion of graduates coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds has remained virtually unchanged in the past fifteen years. However, sometimes non-traditional students are able to amass the required capital to successfully complete university education (Cairns et al. 2013; Carroll 2011; Chesters 2014; Halsey 2013; Jacob et al. 2015; Klausen 2014; Matthys 2012; Reay et al. 2009). What happens next to academically successful non-traditional students? How do their experiences pre and during HE impact on their experiences as graduates? Do they have the same prospects as traditional graduates, particularly in relation to employment? Such questions will be examined next.

#### **3.4.1 The employability discourse**

Since employment is one of the more salient issues for graduates, the literature on graduate outcomes is almost exclusively dominated by the theme of employability. As higher education has become a conduit for economic growth, graduate employability has become a significant area of higher education policy (Dearing 1997; OECD 2012; York 2004). York defines employability as:

....a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. (York 2004, p. 8)

Employability relates to one's ability to get a job or get promoted in one's existing job. For those who are self-employed, employability relates to getting work.

Producing graduates continues to be one of the most important ways in which universities contribute to the economy. However, the idea that higher education is a training ground for the labour market is not uncontested. Many theorists identify a view of education the purpose of which is to advance and enrich the individual through the development of critical and reflective thinking (Gustavsson 2013). Both perspectives however, support the notion that higher education influences individual and societal outcomes, impacting on individual biographies and how individuals contribute to the economy and society. Graduate outcomes are therefore a legitimate concern for a wide variety of stakeholders. An employability

discourse tends to prevail in any discussion of graduate outcomes. This discourse is dominated by two distinct positions: the *mainstream* position and the *alternative* position (Tholen 2013). More recently a view of employability as *processual* (Holmes 2013) has entered the employability discourse. It is useful to examine each of these positions in more detail.

In the *mainstream position* several theoretical perspectives explain the link between educational attainment and employment. *Human capital theory* (Schultz 1971) connects higher educational qualifications to higher productivity and higher wages. The theory suggests a positive relationship between investment in education and labour market outcomes. In a similar vein *signalling theory* (Spence 1973) posits that employers select employees based on their educational credentials which signal their potential to yield a good return on investment. *The skills framework* has been largely influenced by the Dearing report (1997). According to this perspective, simultaneously to promoting knowledge and enlightenment, universities should seek to incorporate what are deemed to be employability skills into curricula activities. In sum, in the mainstream view, employability essentially relates to individual attributes.

One of the main criticisms of the mainstream view is that, since employment is often less subject to individual agency and more subject to structural factors (as not everyone has the same opportunity for educational attainment), the mainstream view legitimizes inequality (Nilsson and Nyström 2013). An alternative theory is therefore required to examine graduates' outcomes in relation to work and social positioning.

The *alternative position*, also known as the critical account, contends that rather than being solely determined by human capital, employability will be influenced by opportunity and inequality in a structural framework (Brown and Hesketh 2004). Although critical theorists tend to support the expansion of higher education, they contend that neo-liberal policies have increased the differences between institutions and therefore the liberating potential of expansion remains under-realised. Mass HE is perpetuating the structural inequalities it was meant to eliminate (Tomlinson 2010). In sum the *alternative* discourse contends that it is difficult to define employability because it is, in fact, socially constructed (Boden and Nedeva 2010).

Holmes (2013) contends that neither of the competing perspectives on graduate employability offers a sound basis for intervention to enhance graduate employability. He posits that the

mainstream approach (what he terms 'employability as possession' p. 542) is difficult to operationalize. Holmes also criticizes the critical account on the grounds that it offers a 'counsel of despair' as it claims that 'elite positions go to those who already have the cultural capital provided by their elite background' (p. 548). Holmes puts forward a third perspective, that of *employability as processual* (p. 548). The key idea here is that graduate employability is not something that exists at one point in time. Rather employability is something which takes place 'over time and in interaction with others' (p. 548). It is a process, and as such, processual. This concept relates strongly to graduate identity.

### **3.4.2 Graduate identity**

Central to the notion of employability as processual is the concept of identity, specifically graduate identity. Recent research has highlighted that the way in which graduates understand and manage their employability is subjective (Bowman et al. 2005; Holmes 2013; Tomlinson 2007, 2012) and largely related to their self-perception. Perception in turn is related to graduates' dispositions which they have developed throughout their lives, deriving from their wider cultural and socio-economic background; what Bourdieu identified as social class habitus. In this context, identity is not defined as something existent or fixed; rather it is relational and emerges from or is modified by, various social processes. Graduates continually negotiate their identity within the labour market and their success is determined by the extent to which they can establish positive identities that allow them to make meaningful and productive contributions (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011; Holmes 2013; Tomlinson 2012). Holmes (2013, p. 549) asserts that graduates must 'act in ways that lead others to ascribe to them the identity of being a person worthy of being employed'. In this sense graduates are ascribed a certain social status, shaped in large part by their own behaviour.

According to Holmes identity is in many senses 'fragile' (2013, p. 549). An individual may claim a certain identity, but this identity, in order to be ratified, must be affirmed or denied by others. Holmes (2013, p. 550) defines graduate employability as:

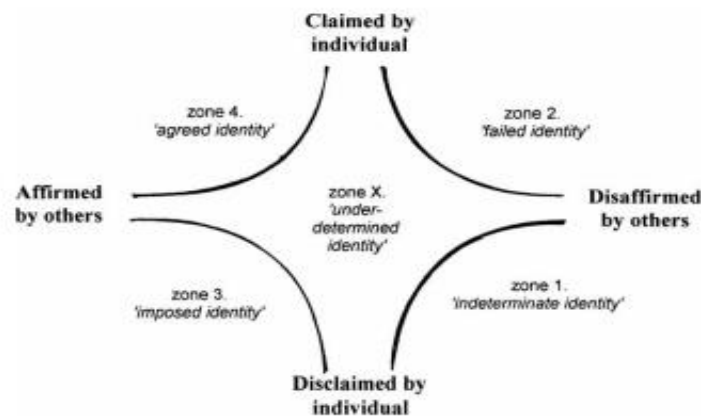
The always –temporary relationship that arises between an individual graduate and the field of employment opportunities, as the graduate engages with those who are 'gatekeepers' to those opportunities, particularly those who make selection decisions.

Holmes writes that graduate identities may be: 'agreed', 'failed', 'imposed', 'indeterminate' or 'under-determined' (Figure 3.1 refers). For example, the classification of failed identity would



apply to a graduate in a non-graduate occupation (Blenkinsopp and Scurry 2007, apply the term GRINGO to this category). Graduates in temporary employment may be ascribed to the 'under-determined' category. Graduates will likely have to authenticate their claim on graduate identity throughout their life course and it is unlikely that there will be a specific list of skills or attributes to facilitate that process. Holmes (2013, p. 551) calls this approach the 'graduate identity approach' and presents it as a more realistic and practical approach for graduates to:

...develop ways of presenting your claim on the identity (of being a graduate worthy of employment) in such a way that it stands a good chance of being affirmed by those who make the selection decision on job applications you make.



**Figure 3.1.** Claim-affirmation model of modalities of emergent identity (Holmes 2013, p. 550)

Jackson (2014, p. 3) employed a national data set to explore skill mastery and the formation of graduate identity in all Bachelor graduates in Australia. She defines graduate identity as:

...having a sense of meaning and self-esteem (Henkel 2005); confidence (Nicholson et al. 2013); a broad understanding of disciplinary knowledge (Reid et al. 2008); a focus on personal development and life-long learning (Bridgstock 2009) and a capacity to transfer skills across contexts

Jackson (2014, p. 16) emphasises that a specific graduate identity is required to engage successfully with employers. She found that the formation of positive graduate identity is more likely to occur in mature graduates who have more life and work experience echoing a previous finding by Bennion et al. (2011). Jackson identifies that off-campus/distance graduates had a more positively perceived formation of graduate identity.

The implication in the literature is that graduate identity is negotiated between the graduate 'self' and the prospective employer or 'other'. The literature focuses on those who transition from full-time education into employment. There is little exploration of how those with an established employment identity, develop a new, graduate related one. How do they begin to see themselves as graduates?

### **3.4.3 Transitioning to the labour market**

Developing graduate careers can take time (Elias and Prucell 2004, 2013; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Holmes 2013) and insecurity is often a feature of early graduate participation in the labour market. New graduates may be drawn to non-graduate work as a way of building up experience. Transitions from education to work are seldom linear or immediate and in recent decades have become more protracted and fragmented (Brooks and Everett 2008; Furlong 2010; Furlong and Cartmel 2005).

One of the ways in which graduates can distinguish themselves and aid their transition to the labour market is through prestigious graduate training schemes. Sometimes these schemes are low paid or unpaid internships (Watson 2013), often rendering them inaccessible to working class/mature graduates (Carroll 2011). Research indicates that working class graduates are often not inclined to assimilate the importance of securing internships (Bathmaker et al. 2013; Brown et al. 2011; Tomalinson 2008). They often focus on the 'old' rules of the game, assuming that securing a degree is enough. Tomalinson (2008) identifies how successful transition into well-paid employment for graduates is no longer certain and how 'the degree is not enough' (p. 49). Brown et al. (2011, p. 142) identify this as an 'opportunity trap', a situation where having a degree is no longer sufficient and where middle and upper class families consciously develop curriculum vitae so that they are positioned to take the best jobs the labour market has to offer. Bathmaker et al. (2013, p. 738) found that working class graduates, who had obtained top grades and who wanted to secure good internships, had difficulty doing so as they did not have the right connections or networks to achieve this. Middle class graduates took these kinds of connections for granted.

As non-traditional graduates are by definition often the first in their families to experience higher education, they often have little cultural capital on which to draw to assist them in manoeuvring their way through the labour market (Thomas and Jones 2007). This lack of

confidence can be problematic as confidence is a characteristic seen as key for graduate level employment (Brown and Hesketh 2004; Nicholson et al. 2013). Finally, networking opportunities, regularly available to more middle class graduates, often elude non-traditional graduates (Purcell et al. 2002).

Some theorists argue that social class has little impact on transitions to the labour market (Chisholm 2006; Pohl and Walther 2007). Chisholm claims that transitions to the labour market are in many ways determined by the welfare regime in which people live. Others however, most particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world, contend that social class helps explain labour market outcomes (Brooks 2009; Brown and Hesketh 2004; Furlong 2010; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Tholen 2013a).

#### **3.4.4 Non-traditional graduate expectations**

Satisfaction is understandably related to expectations (Purcell et al. 2007). Non-traditional graduates often expect to face uncertainty in the labour market (Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Tomlinson 2007) and acknowledge that they must plan ahead. Assumptions regarding a 'job for life' are slowly being replaced with the acknowledgement of the need to remain employable.

Mature graduates often have different expectations than younger graduates about the labour market. Expectations that are excessively positive or excessively negative may be misplaced. Those who anticipate that their age, indicating as it does maturity, experience, and commitment, will be inevitably regarded positively by employers are often disappointed. In the Purcell et al. study (2007) mature graduates often had to reassess their expectations in the light of reality. One 39 year old graduate found she had to undertake unpaid work, in a similar vein to unpaid graduate internships, in order to secure the work experience she required to establish herself in a new career. This is unlikely to be an option for many mature/working class graduates.

Sometimes mature non-traditional graduates have higher expectations in relation to income and often overestimate the financial returns from higher education (Hills 2002; Redmond 2006). Participants in Carroll's (2011) study anticipated that the possession of work experience (together with their new qualification and a good interview) would advantage them in the labour market. Graduates must be able to read the signals of the labour market and refashion their expectations and actions.

### 3.4.5 Non-traditional graduate mobility

Studies indicate that non-traditional graduates are often less mobile than traditional graduates. A lack of geographic mobility was noticed in young working class graduates (Cairns, Growiec and Smyth 2013; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Greenbank and Hepworth 2008; Olson 2014), even when there were few local jobs available (Cairns et al. 2013). The researchers related this to their social class habitus which denied graduates 'admission to the field of mobility' (p. 559). Furlong and Cartmel (2005) however related the finding to a lack of the up-front financial resources required to move away from home. In the Greenbank and Hepworth (2008) study the lack of geographical mobility related to psychological factors (that is, the need to stay close to their families) rather than financial ones. Additionally, working class graduates often continued in their part-time college employment, on a more full-time footing. This also acted as a disincentive to relocate as they had an income on graduation (Greenbank and Hepworth 2008). Olson (2014) found that there was often a disconnect between the geography of first generation<sup>8</sup> working class graduates' job searches and their ambitions.

Mature graduates are also often less geographically mobile (Carroll 2011; Purcell et al. 2007), in part related to family commitments or home ownership. Additionally, older graduates are less likely to change jobs (Purcell et al. 2007). This tendency for non-traditional graduates to stay in their local community can be a barrier to their transitioning to graduate level employment (Cairns, Growiec and Smyth 2013; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Olson 2014; Purcell et al. 2007).

### 3.4.6 Discrimination

Recruitment strategies can often discriminate against non-traditional graduates (Carroll 2011). Screening practices, such as limiting interviews to those who have obtained a certain classification in their final award, or the introduction of screening for academic performance at second level, may militate against non-traditional graduates (Barber et al. 2005; Cooper et al. 2002; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Naylor et al. 2002; Redmond 2006). According to Furlong and Cartmel (2005) working class graduates felt the second level school they had attended,

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<sup>8</sup> Students are considered to be *first-generation* students if neither parent has a bachelor's degree (Engle and Tinto 2008; Olson 2010; Wells and Lynch 2012, p. 679).

together with their accent and address, were barriers to their progression to graduate level employment. Unpaid graduate internships tend to discriminate against mature/working class graduates.

Age discrimination is noted as a disadvantage in labour market outcomes for mature graduates (Blasco et al. 2002; Purcell et al. 2007) with some employers assuming older graduates will lack flexibility and confidence yet expect higher salaries (Purcell et al. 2007; Redmond 2006). Although Carroll (2011, p. 26) found that the majority of mature graduates of full-time programmes did not believe they were disadvantaged in the labour market by age, the majority in this study were in their twenties; those over 30 experienced less favourable outcomes. Siivonen and Isopahkala-Bouret (2014) contend that age can be a positional advantage or disadvantage in the labour market, depending on how it is intertwined with other factors such as social class and the state of economic growth at any given time.

Sometimes non-traditional graduates disqualify themselves for applying for certain employment. Olson (2014) noted that working class graduates often had a negative sense of 'self-efficacy' (that is, set of self-beliefs) and 'outcome expectations' (p. 203). This can cause them to discount certain jobs in the belief that they 'wouldn't fit in there' (p.210). This experience is also recorded for older adult graduates. Organisations which promote themselves as young and dynamic often cause mature graduates to deselect themselves from the application process (Purcell et al. 2007).

### **3.4.7 Who employs mature graduates?**

Mature graduates are more likely to work in the public sector or be self-employed (Egerton 2000; Purcell et al. 2007; Woodfield 2011). Mature graduates in Woodfield's (2011) study were more likely to have been employed by their pre-university employer than traditional entry students (54%/24%). This may relate to the fact that most mature graduates were in public sector employment which tends to facilitate study leave. Alternatively, it may relate to the fact that mature graduates studied part-time while in employment. Woodfield's (2011) study does not make this clear.

While graduates with work experience relevant to the graduate employment they wish to pursue often find themselves in a position of advantage (Neil et al. 2004) the situation is problematic when the job graduates want does not lie within their previous work experience

(Goodman 2005; Harvey 2005; Klausen 2014). Although mature graduates often have the qualities employers say they want i.e. work experience, evidence of transferable skills such as time management, flexibility, commitment to learning and so on, they are nevertheless often deemed unsuitable for 'new graduate jobs' (Purcell et al. 2007, p. 75). This is because many graduate recruitment programmes tend to be specifically designed for those with little or no work experience (Purcell et al. 2007). This would appear to undermine the role of employability skills so regularly promoted in higher education.

Purcell et al. (2007, p. 77) highlight three problems faced by mature graduates: employers may be unclear about where the mature graduate will fit into the organisational hierarchy, particularly if they must report to younger members of staff; employers may have a middle class conception of higher education completion and fail to understand why someone would complete study later in life; mature graduates may themselves be naïve about their prospects.

One of the fundamental ideas behind critical account theory suggests that elite employers prefer to recruit individuals from a social background similar to their own (Brown and Hesketh 2004) thus promoting social reproduction and often limiting the advancement of non-traditional graduates. However, an expansion of this argument, which the study does not address, is that working class employers may also recruit individuals in their own image and likeness.

#### **3.4.8 What employers want**

There is relatively little demand side employability research, that is, research into what employers want. Morley (2007) tried to uncover the X factor of employability; what exactly do employers look for when they recruit graduates. She found that the two most important skills required by employers were team working and communication skills. Subject knowledge and technical/practical skills were in the mid-range of importance. The academic attainment (classification of the award), while initially very important in the screening process, became less important in the final selection. Morley concluded that socio-economic privilege was often transferred onto the way in which skills, competencies and qualifications were digested by employers. Therefore, according to Morley (2007, p. 204) 'the close fit between social hierarchy and employment opportunities continues'.

Stuart et al. (2009) identified the evidencing of leadership in activities as highly desirable. However, some employers had negative views of political involvement, for example in students' unions. A Finnish study undertaken by Siivonen and Isopahkala-Bouret (2014) found that: 'graduation in adulthood had a special significance that was valued by employers' (p. 9).

### **3.4.9 Graduate level employment**

The number of jobs for which a degree is required has grown over the last three decades (Elias and Purcell 2004, 2011; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Green and Zhu 2010). Elias and Purcell (2013, p. 14) define graduate employment as 'the extent to which they are required to use the knowledge and skills they had developed as undergraduates'. The success of graduates is often determined by their ability to access and hold what is regarded as graduate level employment.

Sometimes older graduates experience greater difficulty accessing graduate-level jobs and are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed (Carroll 2011; Purcell et al. 2007; Redmond 2006). In Redmond's UK based study (2006) almost all the mature working class graduates failed to secure graduate level employment. If older students enter HE in order to improve their employment prospects, then such findings certainly raise questions about the value of a degree.

Purcell et al. (2007) establish that both older (over 30) and younger (under 21) graduates were more likely to be in non-graduate jobs. (The other group in this study were aged from 21-30.) For younger graduates this often related to taking a gap year after degree completion -a phenomenon not associated with working class graduates (Furlong 2010). Over the course of time however, the younger graduates in the study were slightly more likely to move into graduate employment.

Interestingly, older graduates were more inclined to comment that the knowledge they had gained in HE was required for their employment, although their job was not classified as a graduate job, perhaps indicating a lack of recognition by employers that the job undertaken was in fact graduate level. The study attributes labour market disadvantage to age, and finds no other link having explored type of work, social background and entry qualification. However, regarding the extent to which graduate level employment had been obtained, the study concludes: 'Approximately two and a half years after graduation, the experiences reported by the three groups converge' (Purcell et al. 2007, p. 68).

Woodfield (2011) produces evidence that mature students are in fact advantaged in the graduate labour market. Notably, they more frequently secured graduate-level work and a higher salary (Woodfield 2011, p. 409). Within Woodfield's research 'The headline trends were for mature students to secure paid employment more readily, with greater likelihood of achieving an above average graduate salary and for them to secure graduate-level employment more often' (p. 422). The key factors which impacted on the ability to secure graduate-level employment for mature graduates were a previous history of employment with the post-graduate employer plus field of study, with science graduates faring better overall. One reason for these research findings may be that Woodfield's study includes part-time and self-employment outcomes in the definition of successful employment. Another reason may be that the outcomes for mature graduates are improving. Importantly Woodfield (2011, p. 409) contends: 'The relative employment success of mature students could not, however, be explained simply as a result of them already being in pre-degree graduate-level jobs'.

Notably, mature students from part-time courses 'improved the overall picture'. This may relate to the fact that mature students who study part-time are normally already gainfully employed. Significantly, Woodfield (2011, p. 413) identifies a gap in the existing literature and writes:

...part-time students spend more years completing their degrees than do full-time students, and that a potentially fruitful line of future research could take this into consideration'.

#### **3.4.10 Non-traditional graduate earnings**

Much of the support for widening access to university for under-represented groups relates to the fact that there are higher rates of return to university degrees (Chesters 2014b) i.e. those who hold degrees earn more. It is noted that even graduates in non-graduate jobs earn more than those without degrees in non-graduate jobs (Furlong and Cartmel 2005). Unsurprisingly, graduates not in graduate employment earn significantly less than those in graduate employment (Purcell et al. 2007). Purcell et al. (2007) identified several factors associated with the rate of growth of earnings (Table 3.1 refers) some of which I will explore in more detail.



#### ***3.4.10.1 Institution effect***

Much research has been conducted in an effort to establish whether attendance at elite institutions results in greater financial returns. Some researchers found an advantage to graduates from elite universities (Black and Smith 2006; Black, Smith and Kermit 2005; Machnin and Vignoles 2005; Ordine and Rose 2015; Smetherham 2006b; Zhang 2005), while others found little or no effect (Dale and Keruge 2002). Smyth and Strathdee (2010) found that reputational advantage tends to manifest itself only over time and in the higher levels of the earning distribution - notable from the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile. (Part-time students were excluded from this study so it is not possible to draw any conclusions on their behalf.) Macmillan et al. (2013) found a significant link between privately educated graduates and entry into high status occupations. The difference was not driven by educational attainment but rather by the status of the university attended. Networking provided an additional advantage over and above socio-economic background. The authors content that greater transparency is required in hiring practices.

Overall, Machin and McNally (2007) conclude that while there is evidence of some effect between institution attended and earnings, it is not conclusive. Kupfer (2011, p. 194) posits that whether or not institutional reputation will confer advantage in the labour market is likely to be a 'function of the specific, national fields of HE and labour markets'.

**Table 3.1.** Main influences on the annual rate of growth of real earning of graduates, 1995-2003

Factors	Higher than average rate of growth	Slower than average rate of growth
Degree type	Maths, computing business studies, law.	Arts, education, social science
Institution	1992 university <sup>9</sup>	HE college
Previous education	High A levels	Low A levels or access qualification
Employment	Modern graduate job	
Gender	Male	Female
Age	Young	Older mature (over 30)

Adapted from Purcell et al. (2007)

#### **3.4.10.2 Social class effect**

Many studies indicate that graduates classified as being from higher socio-economic groups earned more than those from lower socio-economic groups, even when controlling for other variables (Chesters and Watson 2014; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Ordine and Rose 2015; Sylos Labini 2008). Sylos Labini (2008) found parents of middle and upper class students played a positive role in employment attainment through informal social networks. According to Furlong and Cartmel (2005) graduates from less advantaged backgrounds tended to have lower wage expectations and were less likely to hold out for graduate level employment. Ianelli (2011) found that educational expansion has not translated into any change in the patterns of inequality in the chances of entering top-level occupations.

Matthys's (2012) qualitative study of working class, first generation, full-time university graduates in the Netherlands and Belgium, found that although the graduates acquired the

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<sup>9</sup> Under the UK Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 polytechnic's obtained university status and could award their own degrees.

necessary human capital for their professions, their career progression was limited due to their lack of cultural and social capital; 'Being good is not enough to be accepted at the top' (p. 174). The graduates found it difficult to break into the higher levels of the earning distribution. They often became workaholics, encouraged to work hard in an environment where the top positions were always outside their grasp.

Working class graduates tend to acknowledge that they have benefited from their participation in HE and have secured employment which otherwise would have been inaccessible to them. It would seem however that the chance of entering the top-level positions tends to elude working-class graduates.

#### ***3.4.10.3 Age effect***

A question arises as to the rates of return on investment in HE for mature age graduates since, given that they attain the qualification later, they have less time to recoup the costs. However, many studies find positive effects on earnings for mature students who successfully complete courses of study (Blanden et al. 2010; Chesters 2014b; Purcell et al. 2007; Woodfield 2011).

Purcell et al. (2007, p. 70) - controlling for social class, entry qualifications, university, field of study, occupation and gender - found that mature university graduates earn more in their first job after graduation but thereafter their rate of earning growth is slower. This finding is echoed by Chesters and Watson (2014) and Klausen (2014). In their study measuring the returns to lifelong learning, Blanden et al. (2010) found positive effects on both earnings and occupational status for both males and females. However, the impacts were age dependent, only for men aged less than 35 and women aged less than 49. Chester's (2014b) study found that those who completed new qualifications after the age of 25 were more likely to acquire jobs with higher earnings and status than those who did not upgrade their qualifications. However, Klausen's (2014) Danish study held that mature graduates earned less over the long run, with the exception of mature graduates in the public sector.

Some theorists argue that the improvement in earnings for mature graduates comes too late to justify a rate of return on their investment in higher education (Purcell and Elias 2004). Much of the research in relation to earnings is quantitative. One drawback of quantitative research is that it does not tend to consider the full range of factors that might impact on employee decisions. In general older graduates often displayed a different orientation to work;

they placed more emphasis on doing ‘socially useful work’ and less emphasis on ‘high financial reward’ or ‘career development’ than younger graduates (Purcell et al. 2007; Redmond 2006).

In sum while some researchers found that working class/mature graduates tended to earn less than traditional graduates this was not true in all instances.

#### **3.4.11 Social mobility**

The role of education in promoting social mobility is among the central issues in contemporary sociological and political debate. In modern societies, education has become an increasingly important factor in determining which jobs people enter and in determining their social class position (Iannelli and Paterson 2005, p. 1)

Piketty (2014, p. 484) defines social mobility as ‘the intergenerational correlation of education and earned incomes, which measures the reproduction of the skill hierarchy over time.’ Social mobility is often interpreted as ‘achieving a job of higher status’ than that held by parents (Byrom and Lightfoot 2013, p. 814). Educational institutions are often charged with the task of fostering social mobility. According to Piketty (2014) there is little evidence to date that this has happened. Piketty identifies access to higher education as one of the most serious problems facing society in the twenty-first century.

The emphasis in HE up to now on equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome has been problematic (Thompson and Simmons 2013). While participation in HE has increased, it has not broadened, resulting in remarkably little change in social mobility over the past fifty years in Ireland (Flannery and O’Donoghue 2009; McCoy and Smith 2010; O’Connell et al. 2006), the UK (Erikson and Goldthorpe 2010; Goldthorpe and Mills 2008) and the US (Piketty 2014). Educational opportunities continue to be structured by class (Ermisch, Jantti and Smeeding 2012; Strand 2011; Jackson 2013). Additionally, class based inequalities are greater the higher the qualification attained (Sullivan, Heath and Rothson 2011).

Some sociologists have moved away from seeing social mobility as a solution to societal injustices and instead stress the importance of placing more emphasis on social equality (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Reay 2013). According to Reay (2013, p. 662) an equal society would emphasise ‘collective rather than individual advancement, and the narrowing of social and economic differences’. Reay (2013) argues that discourses of social mobility in fact operate

as an 'effective form of symbolic violence' as, in line with neo-liberalist theory, the idea that social mobility is possible means not only that we are responsible for our own social position but also that there is no 'need to dismantle the entrenched positions of the most advantaged classes' (Payne 2012, p. 5).

While economic growth is seen almost universally as a good thing, Wilkinson and Pikett (2010) point out that wealthier societies are not necessarily happier; what really matters is equality. Equal societies tend to be more productive, healthier, happier and safer. While we have avoided the apocalyptic inequalities which Marx predicted if equality was not put centre stage, we have not, according to Piketty, addressed the structural inequalities which we set out to do after the Second World War. Piketty identifies that the main driver of inequality –the tendency of returns on capital to exceed the rate of economic growth–risks undermining social stability and ultimately, democracy. According to Piketty specific structures must be put in place to deal with issues of social justice; economic growth alone will not do this:

Economic growth is quite simply incapable of satisfying this democratic and meritocratic hope, which must create specific institutions for the purpose and not rely solely on market forces or technological progress (Piketty 2014, p. 96)

### **3.5 Distance graduates**

Little official data is gathered on distance graduates. This means we don't know, in any evidence based way, who distance graduates are, whether distance education is broadening or deepening access to university education to under-represented groups or the impact of completing a part-time distance degree on employability. Additionally, important information regarding the educative experience remains unknown. While the importance of educational outcomes is well recognised, the outcomes of a small, but important sector of higher education graduates, are not included in the HE narrative.

### **3.5.1 The pre-participation experience of distance graduates**

Gender and age are the most common demographic variables used in distance education research (Bozkurt et al. 2015) and are also the most popular variables used in research on distance graduates. Distance graduates are in general older than on-campus graduates (Coelli, Tabasso, and Zakirova 2012; Potts and Kleinpeter 2001; Richardson 2009); most graduates are in their early forties. Few studies explore the concept of social class despite the fact that it likely links other variables. It is certainly linked to age (Chesters and Watson 2014; Croxford and Raffe 2014). A focus on social class would therefore add to the existing body of knowledge in relation to distance graduates. An awareness of the role social class plays in distance education could help open up our understanding of why distance students are older, why they struggle with participation and how we might interpret their employability outcomes. No-one is applying social class theory to the study of distance graduates.

Many studies reported a majority of female graduates (Potts and Kleinpeter 2001; Kendal and Pogue 2006; Wilde and Epperson 2006; Draper et al. 2014). This ties in somewhat with Irish (Darmody and Fleming 2009) and international research (Brown et al. 2013; Callender et al. 2006) on part-time students which indicates that women are more likely to participate. However, gender was not a significant variable in the study on technical distance graduates (Pate and Miller 2012). This finding is consistent with international research confirming that males are more likely to participate in technology related degrees (Carnoy et al. 2012; Coldwell et al. 2008). This may indicate that gender is more related to field of study than to mode of delivery.

Flexibility was the primary reason for choosing distance education (Kendal and Pogue 2006; Fahy et al. 2008; Pate and Miller 2012; Draper et al. 2014) as well as being what graduates most liked about the delivery mode. Being able to stay in their home town, while studying, was valued by graduates; many stated they were unable to relocate due to family and work commitments (Kendal et al. 2006; Wilde and Epperson 2006). For these graduates, distance education had been the only viable option, providing them with 'financial security while on the programme and job security on completion'. For many, it was a 'dream come true' (Draper et al. 2014, p. 1308/9). The position of distance graduates was sometimes contrasted to studies of

full-time students for whom working and studying at the same time had a negative impact on achievement and performance (Rochford 2009).

Pursuing a degree, career advancement, acquiring current technical knowledge and enjoyment of learning were additional reasons quoted by graduates (Coelli, Tabasso, and Zakirova 2012; Pate and Miller 2012). Less than thirty per cent were influenced by cost (Wilde et al. 2006).

### **3.5.2 The participation experience of distance graduates**

One of the main purposes of conducting research on graduates is related to programme evaluation. Graduates are uniquely well placed to evaluate their overall educative experience. Additionally, they are free to be honest without fear or favour. However, a caveat in this regard is that graduates are, by definition, successful students. It is not surprising therefore that evaluation was in general favourable. Lawless and Richardson (2004, p. 372 ) point out that surveys of distance graduates ‘have consistently found that distance learning students rate their degree programmes more favourably than do campus based students, and this has been attributed to the availability of well-designed courses and course materials in distance education’. Additionally, students who obtained better classifications of degree produced significantly higher ratings of their courses and significantly higher ratings of their own development (Richardson 2009, p. 89).

On the negative side distance graduates expected a lighter workload and noted that participation required a greater degree of self-direction and self-management than anticipated (Wilde and Epperson 2006; Draper et al. 2014). Graduates often felt disconnected and would have liked more face to face interaction, both teacher to student and student to student (Kendal and Pogue 2006; Wilde and Epperson 2006; Draper et al. 2014). Finally, graduates disliked the limited number of courses on offer through distance learning (Pate and Miller 2012).

Overall distance graduates reported that distance education was not regarded by either employers or students as a less demanding route or a less valuable qualification (Lawless and Richardson 2004; Kendal and Pogue 2006; Wilde and Epperson 2006). Perceived academic quality was of overriding importance to graduates (Lawless and Richardson 2004; Wilde and Epperson 2006). According to Lawless and Richardson, quality related more to perceptions of receiving good materials, clear goals and standards, good tutoring, generic skills and

appropriate assessment rather than appropriate workload or choice of courses. Accreditation, institutional reputation and travel requirements (in that order) were also perceived to be important (Wilde and Epperson 2006).

No study explored graduate perceptions of having 'distance education' highlighted on their degree transcript, or whether they disclosed the mode of study to colleagues and/or employers.

### **3.5.3 The post-participation experience of distance graduates**

Distance graduates experienced a number of different transitions as a result of their studies and are outlined in more detail below.

The first theme emerging consistently from the literature relates to the experience of personal transitioning. Distance graduates almost universally experienced a sense of personal growth and development as a result of degree completion, and regularly reported feeling more confident as individuals (Draper et al. 2014; Fahy et al, 2008). Studies which drew comparisons between the outcomes for on-campus and distance alumni highlighted that distance graduates regularly reported having a greater understanding of cultural difference, society and the environment while on campus alumni self-reported enhanced ability at speaking effectively and using technology (Potts and Kleinpeter 2001; Kendal and Pogue 2006). Jackson's more recent Australian study (2014) was at odds with these findings however and noted that distance alumni were more likely to have less understanding of values beyond their own. Distance graduates in this study also rated their team working and problem solving skills less highly than on-campus students, prompting the expressed need for pedagogical review within distance education in this regard. In general there is a high degree of overlap between graduates' perceptions of how much they have developed personally as a result of their education and their perceptions of the academic quality of that education (Lawless and Richardson 2004).

There is little evidence of negative impacts of degree completion on the personal lives of distance graduates reported in the literature. This could relate to a number of reasons: the studies did not seek this information, those who successfully complete often report positive



experiences and finally, no in-depth interviews were conducted with graduates which facilitate more subtle or nuanced themes to emerge.

Career transitioning was also noted as a theme in the literature. Distance graduates who were in employment, reported feeling more capable of taking on leadership roles (Fahy et al. 2008) and 'more ready to question and challenge' existing practices (Draper et al. 2014, p. 1307). The degree of self-direction and self-management required by distance education promoted the development of management skills in graduates and they reported that this served them well in the work-place (Draper et al., 2014). The increases in reported skills use during and after study are sizeable (Coelli, Tabasso, and Zakirova 2012). Self-motivation, self-discipline, time management, focus, and good communication were all regarded as required skills for successful completion of distance education programmes (Kendal and Pogue 2006) and are skills generally valued in the workplace. Additionally, distance graduates valued the opportunity to evidence their 'academic prowess', something which they felt would otherwise have gone un-noticed (Kendal 2006).

While many distance graduates experienced enhanced chances of promotion (Draper et al. 2014; Green, Ballard and Kern 2007; Fahy et al. 2008; Pate and Miller 2012; Potts and Kleinpeter 2001; Wilde and Epperson 2006), this was more prevalent for those who were already working in the field of their studies, or employed by the state, such as nurses, librarians, social workers, and educators. For these graduates having relevant work experience in addition to their academic qualification positioned them favourably to avail of promotion (Green, Ballard and Kern 2007; Potts and Kleinpeter 2001). A high percentage of distance graduates were already in employment related to their degree though a large minority pursued distance education in order to change career (Wilde and Epperson 2006). Those not already working in a field related to their studies were less likely to report positive impacts on work related responsibilities or salary (Fahy et al. 2008; Wilde and Epperson 2006).

Distance graduates in the Fahy study (2008) experienced greater status among co-workers but this was not the experience of all distance graduates. Although the literature highlights the positive impact of degree completion on personal ability in a work context, it also illuminates difficulties graduates experience in being 'taken seriously' in a new role by colleagues who knew them in their old role (Draper et al. 2014). Peers often found it difficult to accept their

changed or changing role, and graduates report experiences of 'jealousy' and feeling in a 'state of limbo' belonging neither in their new or old roles (Draper et al. 2014, p. 1307). Few studies explored the lived experience of those who changed career as a result of their part-time distance degree.

In the studies which compared on-campus and distance graduates, employment related outcomes were, by and large, similar (Kendal et al. 2006; Potts and Kleinpeter 2001). In the Potts and Kleinpeter study it was remarked that a high percentage of distance graduates were employed prior to, or immediately after graduation. The fact that they were likely employed all through their studies was not considered. Additionally, distance graduates were more likely to develop positive graduate identities (Jackson 2014). This was related to the fact that they were more mature and/or were full time workers with more life and work experience and so more likely to see the value in proactively developing a graduate identity. In Jackson's (2014) comparative study, on-campus alumni were more likely to be employed full time, have higher salaries, and be working towards further study. On the other hand the likelihood of being employed in the public sector was notably higher among distance graduates (Potts and Kleinpeter 2001).

The fact that most distance graduates have extensive work experience should alleviate any concerns that they may lack interpersonal skills resulting from the mode of education (Potts et al. 2001; Wilde and Epperson 2006). Ratnaningsih (2013) identified that distance education could provide graduates with the soft skills required by employers. These were identified as: time management, self-confidence, problem solving, creativity and team-work. Distance educators may need to make more of these findings. Although many full-time programmes have a work experience element, we know from the literature that many lower socio-economic background students lack the 'contacts' or social capital to organise work-placements for themselves (Tomlinson, 2008). Distance graduates, who are already employed, have a significant advantage over graduates with theoretical training alone (Little 2005; Wilde and Epperson 2006). This echoes the findings of Woodfield (2011) on mature students. They are, in essence, already playing the game, unlike full-time non-traditional students who may be seeking to enter the game. However, often as a result of poor social or economic capital, distance graduates do not articulate the skills they already have and so do not accrue social capital from their existing situation. The challenge for distance graduates may be how to

package their pre-existing experiences into 'valuable personal and social capital' (Bathmaker 2013, p. 726).

### **3.6 Summary**

This review has examined international evidence and theory in relation to non-traditional higher education graduates from full-time, part-time and distance programmes of study. The review offers a detailed analysis and synthesis of refereed scholarly articles published worldwide.

The pre-participation experience of non-traditional graduates indicates that educational expansion has not achieved equity of access to HE. Public policy plays a critical role in this arena. Social selection takes place both in terms of eligibility to enter HE and differentiation of HE systems selected. While much is known about the pre-participation experience of non-traditional graduates of full-time programmes, far less is known about the pre-participation experience of those who complete part-time programmes of study. The literature on part-time distance graduates is under-developed, particularly in relation to social class.

The review also highlights the participatory experiences of non-traditional graduates who often struggle to fit in with their more advantaged peers and into a middle class institutional habitus. Many do not engage with extra-curricular activities thus limiting their exposure to socialisation opportunities and associated social capital. While much is written about student withdrawal from distance education (Simpson 2002; Subotzky and Prinsloo 2011; Woodley 2004), little is known about the participation experiences of successful part-time distance students; the obstacles they face and whether they accrue capital from their social networks.

The existing body of knowledge on non-traditional graduates appears contradictory. While some studies relate a discourse of disadvantage around labour market outcomes, other studies relate how education in adulthood was seen to enhance employability. The combination of relevant work experience and current qualifications can make adult candidates strong contenders in the labour market. Increasingly the research reports that working class graduates take personal responsibility for their ability or inability to secure suitable employment. They are less likely to relate outcomes to structural inequalities (Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Tomlinson 2007). Importantly much of the employability literature focuses

on the outcomes for non-traditional graduates of full-time programs as they transition from university to work. The impact of completing a university degree on a part-time basis, while already in employment, is somewhat under-explored.

Employment is one of the most salient issues for graduates. Some theorists relate employability to individual attributes. Others contend it is socially constructed. Transitioning to the graduate labour market is not straightforward, particularly for non-traditional graduates who may encounter prejudice: their own or that of others. Furthermore mature students, as their future in the labour market is likely to be shorter than younger graduates, need to envision the benefits of HE participation in a different manner to younger participants. Additionally, those who study part-time take a longer time to complete their degree. How does this impact on labour market opportunity? How do mature graduates build a graduate identity on top of a pre-existing employment identity? Is more class related work required of them as graduates?

The review identified a dearth of available literature on distance graduates, evidence of the lack of state involvement in this form of education delivery as state funding would no doubt generate the requirement for more literature on graduate outcomes. Finally, the review identifies aspects of the experience of distance graduates which the extant literature has to date failed to explore. In nature most of the existing research on distance graduates is a-theoretical, limiting the understanding and progression of the research field.

Emerging from the literature, an elaboration of the research objectives and methodology to be employed in the case study institution are described and justified in the Methodology chapter.

## **4 Methodology**

This chapter outlines the research methodology and methods for this study. The chapter commences with an elaboration on the objectives of the study. It then outlines the competing philosophical paradigms and methodologies. The selection of the research methodology and the development of the data collection methods are discussed, together with the challenges presented by selection of these instruments. The ethical implications of the research are considered. So too are the limitations of the study. The chapter seeks to justify the methodological position.

### **4.1 Aim of the Study**

The aim of this research is to enable the following questions to be answered:

1. Why, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, do people complete an undergraduate degree by part-time distance education?
2. How have they experienced the field of part-time distance education?
3. How does completion of a part-time distance degree impact on the employability of graduates?

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 226) tell us that the aim of research is to 'resolve the problem in the sense of accumulating sufficient knowledge to lead to understanding or explanation'. Three 'problems' are of key interest in this study. The first relates to access to university education, the second relates to the part-time university participation experience and the third relates to employability outcomes for part-time distance graduates.

By contextualising Irish higher education policy with the existing knowledge on under-represented students, this study asks whether Irish policy on targeting full-time education participation is a valid approach to achieving equity in higher education. Through the exploration of the part-time distance graduate's access experience, I endeavour to open up our understanding of university access.

Closely related to the first question, this research examines the participation experiences of part-time distance graduates. Distance students are notoriously difficult to retain; the very reasons which bring them to distance education, such as work and family commitments, also cause them to subsequently withdraw (Kember 1995; Simpson 2002; Tinto 1993; Woodley 2004). What obstacles do successful students face? What demands does the field of distance education make on graduates? Graduates are in the unique position of being able to evaluate their overall educative experience. For this reason knowing our graduates positions us to better understand the student experience and do things better for future part-time distance learners. Graduate data has the potential to positively affect programme evolution and policy development in relation to higher education access.

Finally how does having a university degree impact on the *employability* of distance graduates? Research indicates that there is often little security in being employed; being employable is what matters most (Dearing 1997; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Nilsson and Nyström 2013; OECD 2012; Stiwnne and Alves 2010; Tomlinson 2010; Yorke 2004). We know from the literature that mature students tend to be primarily interested in enhancing their employment opportunities (Coelli, Tabasso and Zakirova 2012; Purcell et al. 2007; Redmond 2006; Siivonen and Isopahkala-Bouret 2014). Woodley (2011) suggests that ‘...part-time students spend more years completing their degrees than do full-time students, and that a potentially fruitful line of future research could take this into consideration’. How does protracted completion impact distance graduates? How is their credential perceived and received in the labour market?

By focusing on these themes I hope to gain a more complete picture of the part-time distance graduate experience.

## **4.2 Research Philosophies and Methodologies**

Mertons (2009) identifies four dominant research philosophical paradigms, each related to methods used to collect and analyse data;

- Positivism and post-positivism, which tend to use predominantly quantitative methods
- Constructivism, which uses predominantly qualitative methods
- Transformative or emancipatory research, which uses predominantly participatory methods

- Pragmatism, which selects methods on the basis of need and uses predominantly mixed methods

Each research paradigm has its own characteristics as outlined by Ponterotto and Grieger (2007). The philosophical doctrine of positivism is attributed to Auguste Comte (1798-1857). In this approach, scientific observation and experiment form the basis of knowledge. Positivists believe that the social world can be studied objectively, in the same way as the natural world, and that it is possible to explain the causes and effects of phenomena (Mertens 2010). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a movement away from positivism towards a belief that knowledge is often not based on immutable truths and that observations can be fallible. However, such post-positivists continued to be concerned with the possibility of truth and the generalizability of results. The ontological position or belief system underpinning this approach is objectivism. The scientific approach dominates this paradigm with quantitative methods used to measure data.

Constructivism offers an alternative view to the post-positivist paradigm and is grounded in the philosophy of hermeneutics, the study of interpretive understanding. For constructivists, knowledge is socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1975 ed.) Everyone involved in the research plays a role in producing the knowledge arising from it (Mertens 2010). The researcher's prior beliefs and values play a part in how they interpret meaning. Research is not objective, but is recognised as a product of the researcher's own values. This differs greatly from the positivist approach where the researcher remains detached from the research process. With constructivism, meaning is negotiated and interpreted. Because of this, flexibility is required in the research design, to allow for possibilities arising from the research which may not have been considered at the start of the research process.

The ontological position associated with this philosophy is constructionism. This paradigm is mainly associated with qualitative methods but can use quantitative techniques.

The transformative or emancipatory paradigm challenges the aforementioned traditional research paradigms as being inappropriate when studying the lives of the marginalised in society. It raises questions around the appropriateness of a dominant group conducting research on oppressed groups. An example of transformative research is the empowering research of Paulo Freire (1972). Transformative researchers 'consciously and explicitly position

themselves side by side with the less powerful in a joint effort to bring about social transformation' (Mertens, 2010 p21). This paradigm may use qualitative or quantitative methods.

The pragmatic paradigm is closely aligned with constructivism. Early pragmatists such as John Dewey and George Herbert believed in the idea of 'workability' and practical thinking. The research methods chosen in the pragmatic paradigm will be those most appropriate to the problem, with mixed methods a favoured approach to data collection. The value of the research is judged by its effectiveness.

### **4.3 The Question of Paradigm**

For Mertens (2010), 'paradigm' represents the researcher's view of the world, together with the philosophical approach which guides it. The researcher's paradigm or view of the world will strongly influence their approach to research. As such, 'a journey begins before the travellers depart' (Charmaz 2005).

This study is primarily a qualitative study, grounded in the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism is itself grounded in the philosophy of hermeneutics, the study of interpretive understanding. For constructivists, knowledge is socially constructed (Vygotsky 1975 ed.) Everyone involved in the research plays a role in producing the knowledge arising from it (Mertens 2010). The researcher's prior beliefs and values play a part in how they interpret meaning. Research is not objective, but is recognised as a product of the researcher's own values. This differs greatly from the positivist approach where the researcher remains detached from the research process. With constructivism, meaning is negotiated and interpreted. The ontological position associated with this philosophy is constructionism. This paradigm is mainly associated with qualitative methods but can use quantitative techniques.

Cantrell (1990, p. 5) suggests that education research, because of its complexity, is 'entangled in interrelationships, replete with social, political and economic context, and laden with values' and therefore requires an alternative to the positivist approach. My research study does not fall within the positivist paradigm. On a practical level, a strictly controlled experimental approach can be difficult to employ when dealing with people. In the context of my study it is



not possible to perceive of one true reality but rather multiple realities, each socially constructed and valid. For Guba (1990) if research is grounded in reality it will be subject to the views of the researcher.

Personal biases are almost inevitable in research. Even in purely scientific research the researcher chooses what to study. For this reason great attention is paid to identify, explore and set aside such biases in my research project. The purpose of the research is to interact with the participants to explore their experience and to search for meaning and insight from that experience.

Part-time distance students are regarded as non-traditional students. This can be interpreted as meaning that their relationship with higher education is not straightforward. It has a sociocultural context. It is this context which facilitates the individual stories, enabling the construction of knowledge about this particular social situation. My research study is interpretive in nature; I interpret the data and so I am connected to the world I study. As I learn how participants make meaning of their experiences, I am making meaning from my own experience. For these reasons my research is best situated in the constructivist paradigm.

My interest in distance education comes from a social justice perspective. I am interested in the question of fair and equitable access to Irish university education. Like many others, the foundations for my view of the world were laid in childhood. My own background is working class; my parents were poorly educated though my mother was interested in education and saw the value of it, particularly since my parents' lack of education came against them many times in their lives.

My third level studies were completed at night, while working full time. I completed the evening degree offered by University College Dublin (UCD). Absorbed as I was in my own situation, I did not reflect at the time that participation for me was only possible because I lived in Dublin, and therefore close to a university. At the time I was living with my parents, my only commitment was to myself. I did not consider how difficult participation was for those who had to go home after an evening of lectures and look after their own cooking and cleaning, and attend to family responsibilities. I suspect the dropout rate from this evening degree was high. So too, I suspect, was the failure rate. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) comment that paradigm is the

‘net that contains the researcher’s epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises’ (p. 13). For me, the paradigm net was cast early on.

#### **4.4 Case study methodology**

This research employs case study methodology to explore the experiences of part-time distance graduates from one institution. Case study research has long occupied a position of prevalence in education (Campoy 2004; Merriam 1988; Tellis 1997). It is a suitable methodology when a holistic, in-depth study is required (Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg 1991). For Creswell (2007) Case Studies differ from Ethnographies in that ‘the intent in ethnography is to determine how the culture works rather than to understand an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration’ (p. 73). For Yin (2014, p. 14) case studies are particularly useful when asking ‘why’ or ‘how’ questions about a ‘contemporary set of events over which the researcher has little or no control’.

Case studies are concerned with the construction of rich and detailed knowledge about a single ‘case’. It is the situation which the Open Education Unit at DCU occupies, its purpose to provide university education to off-campus students, its context in the broader scheme of Irish higher education provision, and the researcher’s desire to construct knowledge about part-time distance graduates which determines the driving force to study this case in its context. The strength of case study methodology lies in the fact that it is designed to explore and incorporate the view point of the participants by using multiple sources of data. Case studies give a voice to all relevant groups and this voice tempers that of the researcher (Yin 1981a).

##### **4.4.1 Case study definition**

Case studies are defined as being the exploration, explanation, or description of a single entity - the case, bounded by time and activity and using a variety of data collection methods (Merriam 1988; Yin 1981; Creswell 2007).

Yin develops this further (2014, p. 24) by identifying two strands to case study definition, that of *scope* and *features*. The scope of the case study is to ‘investigate a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context’. The features of a case study (Yin 2014, p. 17) are that it:

- copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result
- relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result
- benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.

The study is contemporary to the extent that it relates to the present and recent past and involves collecting data on recent graduates. While there are many variables of interest, all data collected relates to the 'case' under study. As such, the case is the only 'data point'.

Multiple data collection methods, both quantitative and qualitative, are employed though the idea of triangulation in the classic form is contested. The purpose of the research is to explore as many facets of the issues under study as possible rather than to seek convergence per se.

A theoretical lens, derived from the social reproduction theory of Bourdieu (1979, 1986) is employed to guide the research. According to Yin a theoretical framework can 'play a critical role in helping you to generalize the lessons learned from your case study' (2014, p. 40). A theoretical lens also helped inform the data collection and analysis. The interplay of theory and data took place on an iterative basis.

#### **4.4.2 Case study identification**

Yin has identified three types of case study Exploratory, Explanatory and Descriptive (2014, p.238) as follows:

- Exploratory case studies explore situations with a view to identifying research questions or procedures to be used in subsequent research.
- Explanatory case studies seek to explain how or why some condition came to be.
- Descriptive case studies seek to describe a phenomenon (the 'case') in its real world context.

This study is exploratory, explanatory and descriptive as it seeks to explore, with a view to describing and explaining, the reasons why students choose distance education, their participatory experience, and how holding a degree impacted on their employability.

#### 4.4.3 Case study design

Yin (2014, p. 29) identifies five components of case study design which he feels are particularly important:

- Case study questions
- Case study propositions
- Case study unit(s) of analysis
- The logic linking the data to the propositions
- The criteria for interpreting the findings

Case studies are particularly useful in answering ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions such as those posed in this research study. The principal research questions are outlined in table 4.1.

In order to focus on exactly what is to be studied within the broader research questions, it is useful to formulate some propositions. Propositions are ideas or opinions which assist us in identifying the relevant information we want to collect in the case under study. Deriving from the conceptual framework of Bourdieu (1979, 1986) in relation to *habitus*, *field* and *capital* (see Chapter 2) these questions are further developed along the lines outlined in table 4.1.

This research study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of certain issues of concern in a single educational organisation, and as such, is a single-case study and is both defined and bounded.

The articulation of propositions can assist in the development of suitable and appropriate data collection methods. In turn the propositions can assist in assembling the case study data to facilitate analysis. In this study the data will be linked to the propositions through the use of thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001; Braun and Clarke 2006), informed by Bourdieu’s conceptual framework of *habitus*, *field* and *capital*.

**Table 4.1.** Case study questions and related propositions

Pre-participation phase	
Question 1	Why, in the early 21 <sup>st</sup> century, do people complete an undergraduate degree by part-time distance education?
Propositions	P1. Graduates are new to, or from socio-economic groups under-represented in, higher education.  P2. Social class plays a role in their HE access experience.
Participation phase	
Question 2	How have graduates experienced the field of part-time distance education?
Propositions	P1. Successful students face obstacles in the field of part-time distance education.  P2. Successful distance students accrue capital from their social networks, both inside and outside their courses.
Post-participation phase	
Question 3	How does completion of a part-time distance degree impact on the employability of graduates?
Propositions	P1. 'Lost years are a step toward relegation or elimination' (Bourdieu 1979 p.105) for distance graduates.  P2. Social class impacts on the employability of graduates.

One of the most important strategies in interpreting case study findings is to identify and deal with rival explanations for the findings (Yin 2014). This warning is helpful as it reinforces the requirement to proceed with caution and to employ professional standards of judgement in interpreting case study findings. However, Rosen tells us:

While the authority of an interpretation is never absolute, its value does not rest on whether an alternative explanation can account for the same data. Instead, its value rests on whether the explanation accounts for the data in a plausible manner, or whether we are able to provide our own accountings for the reported data (Rosen 1991, p. 2)

The purpose of this study is to explore, describe and explain the experiences of part-time distance graduates. Insight and evidence are provided in the first instance by studying the case. The study is not attempting to suggest that the research presented represents the whole truth

of why all students complete part-time higher education, but it represents part of the truth. Every part of the truth is important.

The case presents an opportunity to develop theory regarding part-time higher education and/or the students who complete it. Theories help us understand phenomena and how they relate to each other, with a view to explaining why they happen, but one is unlikely to reject or prove a theory on the basis of this one case.

Overall, the researcher must be slow to attribute broad causal representations to case study outcomes. A correlation may be established, but correlation is not causation. The intention of case study research is not so much to generalise findings as to provide a unique insight and interpretation of a phenomenon (Merriman 1988). The case offers an opportunity to study in depth the causal components relating to this case, at this point in time. 'The product of a good case study is insight' (Geering 2007, p. 7).

#### **4.5 Mixed methods**

While methodology refers to the paradigm that guides the research, methods refer to the way data is collected and analysed. This study employs a mixed methods approach to data collection. With the exception of the positivist tradition, all paradigms may use both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect and analyse data. Gerring (2007, p. 11) tells us that most current social science case studies employ both methods. He further contends that:

If the within-case evidence drawn from a case study can be profitably addressed with quantitative techniques, these techniques must be assimilated in the case study method.

This research study employs three principal sources of data: archival records, a survey to answer the broad, framework questions and one of the most dominant forms of data collection used in qualitative research: the interview. The data sources are supplemented by the use of information from LinkedIn (<https://www.linkedin.com/home>).

Distance education students tend to be geographically dispersed with busy lives and many demands on their time. Some traditional qualitative data collections methods present problems in this context. Observation of participants is difficult. Arranging interviews may also be difficult. There is justification for using an online survey. However, response rates for online

surveys are notoriously low (Scheuren 2004). This can be compensated for with archival and interview data. On the other hand if not many respondents are available for interview or focus groups, this can be compensated for by data from the online survey. A combination of methods represents the best and least obtrusive way of collecting data in the distance education context. The archival records and online survey will provide the breadth and scope for the study; the interviews will add depth and richness. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 17) define mixed methods research as:

...the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study.

#### **4.5.1 The Incompatibility Thesis**

Purists from both qualitative and quantitative schools argue that paradigms and their methods should not be mixed. Known as the incompatibility theses, this position was first posited by Howe (1988). In order to address the issue raised by this thesis, there is a value in looking at paradigms and methods separately.

Regarding paradigms, Creswell (1994) identifies a model which he calls the 'dominant-less dominant design', where there is a single dominant paradigm with a small section of the total study from the less dominant paradigm. In this model all other aspects of the study e.g. the introduction, literature review, theory, presentation of findings and conclusion are all drawn from the dominant paradigm. Morse (1991, p.121) contends that in situations like this, '...a project must be either theoretically driven by the qualitative method, incorporating a complementary quantitative component or theoretically driven by the quantitative method, incorporating a complementary qualitative component'. Morse further contends that the two paradigms cannot be weighted equally in a single study; one paradigm must dominate. While mixed methods of data collection are employed in my research, the constructivist paradigm dominates.

When we look at quantitative and qualitative methodologies, there are many commonalities between them. Both methodologies:

- describe and explain the data
- are concerned with validity
- seek to examine and understand phenomena
- are concerned with ethics and improvement
- must provide a rationale for the interpretation of their data
- aim to produce high-quality and rigorous research

For Dzurec and Abraham (1993, p. 75), 'the objectives, scope and nature of inquiry are consistent across methods and across paradigms'. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) go one step further by asserting that the logic of justification, itself an important element of epistemology, allows for the combination of data collection and data analysis across methods. They highlight that even in scientific research, someone decides what to study, what to highlight, what to emphasise, what to publish. Therefore, they contend, while objectivity is an important ideal, no research can be regarded as completely value free.

#### **4.5.2 Qualitative and quantitative research**

Quantitative methods help establish key facts and observable patterns. In this way quantitative research is useful in providing a framework for a social situation. However, the sole use of quantitative techniques might conceal important information. While surveys are good at answering 'who' questions, survey results may lack context. The text may remain silent. Consequently, qualitative data, such as that gathered through interviews, plays an important role when we want to gain insight and make sense of experience.

For Henwood (1996) qualitative research involves exploring meanings and interpretation while being careful not to reduce them to feelings or behaviours. Qualitative research is generally interpretative, taking a constructivist, as opposed to a realist, position on knowing. Robson (2002) cautions us against case studies appearing as anecdotal accounts of events. This caution is useful and reminds us that great attention must be paid to robust methodological procedures which have been well developed and tested (Yin 1993; Stake 1995). Additionally, Yin (2003) cautions about drawing statistical generalisations from case study data. It is important to be mindful of this caution when employing a survey to collect quantitative data. The data refers only to the case under study and has no broader significance.



When choosing a research method, awareness of what will work best to answer the research question is important. Understanding of the strengths and, more particularly, the weaknesses of each method is also important. In this way it is possible to some extent mitigate against the weaknesses or, at the very least, be prepared to face them. In the final analysis a mixed methods approach is most helpful and effective in this research study.

## **4.6 Research design**

The literature review, informed by the research aims, was used to develop the data collection instruments: the survey and interviews. This research is organized into three distinct but related stages: archival records, survey and interview stages.

### **4.6.1 Archival records**

The first stage of the research consisted of an analysis of archival records on all those who had graduated with a level 8 degree between 2012 and 2015 (n=268). Application forms were the main source of this data. This information is important as graduates, in particular distance graduates, can be hard to reach. The institutional records permitted an almost complete socio-economic profile, including principal economic status, to be drawn of the graduates at commencement of their studies.

All distance students who apply to study at the case study institution are required to complete an application form. Since 2013 applicants apply through the PAC (Postgraduate Application Centre) website even though they are applying for an undergraduate course. PAC was chosen because it is a less costly option than the ostensibly more appropriate CAO (Central Applications Office) system for undergraduate applications. There is currently no central application system for those applying to part-time or distance education programmes of study in Irish higher education. The HEA (2012) has identified that this is a matter which needs to be addressed.

Prior to 2013, and since 2009, students applied online through a DCU distance specific application process. Before 2009, candidates applied by postal application. Copies of the various iterations of the application form are included in Appendix A.

The application form has taken different forms over the years, gathering different information with each iteration. The current application form gathers basic biographical information

together with Personal Public Service (PPS) number, information regarding disability, prior education, English language competency and how applicants heard about the courses. Because graduates had completed various versions of the application form, the same information is not available for every graduate. Furthermore, several graduates did not complete all sections of the application form; for example, in relation to their previous educational attainment or their employment. Where information is unavailable it is recorded as *missing* in the Findings Chapter of this research study. Students who are applying for a degree programme and have a low level of education and/or low status employment may be unwilling to volunteer information in this regard. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that the missing data are not equally distributed in relation to these variables.

Applicants who go on to register for the degree programme complete the standard DCU online registration form. However, as they are not full-time students, they do not complete the section on 'equal access data'. This is problematic in a number of ways:

- The distance education unit has incomplete data on their students (for example regarding their socio-economic background).
- The university has incomplete data on its student cohort.
- The state has incomplete data on the role distance education plays in the HE access agenda.
- The point of pre-entry is generally regarded as a key point of compliance for students and represents an optimum time to gather data.

The application and registration documentation is important in gathering data on the profile of the students who later went on to graduate. The application forms are held in a paper based student file, which also holds other important documentation relating to a student's participation on the programme for example any deferral applications, appeals, extenuating circumstances, etc. Registration information is held online, within a student records database.

Overall each archive represents an important source of information regarding each graduate. Yin contends that 'Because of their overall value, documents play an explicit role in any data collection in doing case study research' (2014, p. 107). Archival data was used to supplement the data from the survey and to help inform the schedule of questions used in the interviews.

#### **4.6.2 Survey design**

The second stage of the research was the survey stage, which consisted of two phases. In Phase One a Graduate Survey (Appendix B) was developed, based on existing CSO and HEA survey instruments and partially adapted from Callender (2006). The intention was to send the graduate survey to graduates as soon as possible after graduation to ensure they were contacted while a) their contact details were current and b) their participation experience was fresh in their minds. For Phase Two an Employability Survey (Appendix C) was developed. The Employability Survey was also partially adapted from existing instruments (Fahy et al. 2008; Furlong and Cartmel 2004; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Purcell et al. 2007; Woodfield 2011). The intention was to administer this survey towards the end of the data collection period (end 2015), allowing graduates time to assess the impact of completing the degree on their employability. The surveys were tailored to suit part-time off-campus students.

The surveys were designed using surveymonkey.com, an online survey tool, and also administered online. The Internet is widely regarded in the literature as an acceptable tool for data collection (Dillman and Bowker 2001; Solomon 2001). There are many advantages to using web-based administration for surveys: they are cost effective, fast and flexible (Cook, Heath and Thompson 2000). They have the potential to reach large numbers of respondents and they can facilitate a quick response time (Schmit 1997).

The survey instruments were carefully constructed and timed to encourage a high response rate. Within the surveys, key terms were defined for participants. For example, employability was defined as relating to one's ability to get a job or get promoted in one's existing job.

The purpose of the surveys for this case study was fourfold:

- to profile graduates regarding key variables including socio-economic background
- to further explore the reasons why graduates chose distance education
- to assess graduates participation experience
- to assess how graduates view the impact of completing the degree on their employability

According to Scheuren (2004), identifying the objectives of the research is the most critical stage in designing a survey.

The survey is more likely to be successful if the concepts are clearly defined and the questions clearly articulated. For Scheuren, the length of the survey is also important. Long surveys, he contends, can cause respondents to lose interest and submit incomplete answers or worse still, no answers at all. De Vaus (1991, p. 109), on the other hand, states that respondents can sometimes view short surveys as trivial and so not complete them. He goes on to say that long surveys will not be problematic to specialised populations, who are interested in the topic under question. As distance students tend to care about distance education and educational opportunities, I hoped this theory would apply to them and they would be sufficiently interested to complete the survey. Surveys are useful for gathering comprehensive data from a dispersed population. The Graduate Survey consisted of twenty-one questions. The Employability Survey consisted of fifteen questions. The length was consistent with other graduate surveys.

Rather than consisting of various sections, the surveys were designed to consist of only one page. They were constructed in this manner because this design allowed respondents to see, once they clicked the link, each question and exactly how long the survey was. It was felt this would improve the response rate as respondents would know exactly what was involved and could estimate how long each survey might take to complete.

Despite not being divided into separate pages, the survey had clearly defined themes. Theorists (De Vaus 1991; Jeavons 1998) suggest that opening questions should be easy and, ideally, enjoyable to answer. The first four questions of each survey simply asked respondents about their degree: what degree they had completed, what year they had completed the degree, their age group and their gender. This data is available from the student files/records but I wanted to contextualise it in relation to the other data gathered in the survey. It also made for an easy-going, non-threatening start to the surveys.

The Graduate Survey then went on to ask about the reasons why respondents had chosen to study by distance education, how they experienced participation, their views of the course and finally some demographic questions to gather information on the profile of respondents, particularly in relation to their socio-economic profile. The manner in which socio-economic background is determined is important. The socio-economic background of students is normally determined by the employment and education of their parents. However,

independent students over the age of 23 are classified based on their own income and that of their spouse or civil partner. This metric is questioned in this research, as we know from the literature that those who participate in HE as adults have frequently delayed their participation for reasons relating to social class (Chesters and Watson 2014; Croxford and Raffe 2014). The current metric obscures the social class of origin of adult students and limits our understanding of the role of part-time HE in broadening access. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) caution us to be aware of this, stating that it is the occupation of parents when the student is approximately 15 years old which influences their participation in HE. In order to get a clear picture of the socio-economic *background* of graduates, the Graduate Survey asked respondents to provide the employment group, economic status and educational attainment of their parents/guardians at the time when they (the graduate) left compulsory education. This helps us draw an accurate account of the impact of social structures on participation in higher education for this cohort.

Within the Employability Survey it was important to gather information which was not gathered on the DCU First Destinations Survey. The first four questions were similar to those on the Graduate Survey. Thereafter graduates were asked about their current employment, factors which the graduate felt were important to employability, and the extent to which the graduate was in graduate level employment.

A key issue with any survey is whether the response rate will be sufficient for meaningful analysis. Internet surveys have significantly lower response rates than either phone or mailed surveys (Medin, Roy and Ann 1999). Solomon (2001) identifies some factors which can improve response rates for internet surveys such as personalised email cover letters, pre-notification of the intent to survey, a simple survey format and follow-up reminders. All of these strategies were adopted in this case study. While there are many online tools which streamline sending surveys (e.g. SurveyMonkey), in the final analysis the researcher must formulate the questions to ensure they are easy to read, easy to answer and, most importantly, that they gather information relevant to the research questions. An issue with anything delivered over the Internet is the possibility of it being accessed by those for whom it is not intended. For this reason it was important to have some form of identification protocol for participants. This is also important to help ensure there are not multiple responses from any one person.

Every effort was made to pre-empt issues which respondents might find difficult and iron them out in advance.

Where internet surveys are used within populations which are internet literate they can offer more advantages than other forms of data collection (Aoki and Elasmir 2000). Fortunately all participants in this study were in this category, having completed a large proportion of their studies online.

The surveys for this research were designed based on principles outlined by Dillman and Bowker (2001) and DeVaus (1991) for the design of web based surveys. The principles are adapted in Table 4.2.

**Table 4.2.** Survey Design Principles

	Principles of survey design (De Vaus,1991; Dillman and Bowker, 2001)	Principles used in this case study
1	Ensure access to the survey is limited to those whom you want to include in the sample	Participants were emailed with a personalised link which brought them directly to the surveys.
2	Ensure the welcome screen for the web survey is motivational and outlines the case for responding, including clear instructions on how to respond.	The welcome page for the surveys was motivational, clearly outlining the purpose of the study and emphasising the case for responding. It reiterated some details from the introductory email
3.	The first question should be an item that is of interest to the respondent, non-threatening, easily answered and completely visible on the first screen. Frontloading of demographic questions should be avoided.	The first question related to the degree the graduate had completed.
4.	Use a familiar format for question presentation.	The format used was conventional.
5.	Restrict the use of colour to help ensure readability and ease of use.	One basic colour scheme was employed.
6.	Keep the visual appearance of each question consistent across various browsers.	The surveys were tested in various browsers and appeared consistent across the range employed.
7.	Provide clear instructions on any computer actions required to answer each question.	Instructions regarding completion of the survey were clearly outlined in the covering email and also at relevant intervals in the survey itself.
8.	Avoid the over use of drop-down boxes	The online survey did not use drop down boxes. All selection options were written out. A text box for 'other' responses was included.
9.	Respondents should not be forced to answer a question before seeing or answering subsequent questions.	Questions could be answered in any order. Respondents were not forced to answer any question in order to complete the survey.
10.	Web surveys should be constructed so that they scroll from question to question.	The survey was constructed as one page. This allowed respondents to scroll from question to question and see the entire survey once they opened it.

11.	Avoid situations where the number of answer choices is greater than the number that can be displayed in a single column or on one screen.	No question included answer choices that were not displayed on one screen.
12.	Where possible, use graphical symbols or words that facilitate the respondent knowing where they are in the completion process.	The full survey was visible as one page so respondents knew exactly how long it was and where they were in the completion process at every stage.
13.	Restrict the number of open-ended questions and questions that are known to be difficult to measure.	A small, but important, number of open-ended questions were employed in the survey to facilitate the gathering of qualitative data applicable to the survey population.

#### 4.6.3 Interview design

Interviews were considered a valuable method of data collection for this study as they are a very useful way of exploring, in depth, the reasons for certain opinions and attitudes among people and for exploring the thought processes involved in individual decision making (Patton 2002). Interviews provide an opportunity to seek clarification both by the interviewer and interviewee and therefore allow for co-construction of the research. Unlike surveys, interviews offer a more ‘flexible and adaptable way of finding things out’ (Robson 1993, p. 229). As interviews are time-consuming to conduct and analyse, this research project set out to restrict the number of interviews to between fifteen and twenty.

There are many different types of interview in education research: the semi-structured interview, the in-depth interview, group interviews/focus groups and non-directive interviews (Robson 2002). This research employed semi-structured interviews as a way of exploring certain issues, about which some knowledge had already been gathered. The semi-structured nature of the interviews facilitates a focusing on certain phenomena of interest, and should help prevent wandering off-topic while facilitating wandering through the topics. Semi-structured interviews therefore require the pre-planning of an interview schedule or guide (Robson 1993, 2002). The schedule should be flexible enough to allow for adaption if required but in a ‘careful and theorised way’ (Wengraf 2001, p. 5).



While not wanting to be overly prescriptive, I did not want interviewees to wander off in directions unrelated to the research. I also wanted to impose a similar discipline on myself. The Interview Schedule is included in Appendix D. The questions were mostly open-ended to evoke more in depth responses from participants (Creswell 2007). The interview schedule addressed the pre-participation, participation and post-participation experiences of graduates. The interview questions in relation to access to HE were derived from the concepts of habitus, field and capital identified by Bourdieu. The questions in relation to participation were informed by the literature in relation to distance and part-time HE (in particular Butcher 2015; Simpson 2002) and the sociology of education literature (Reay 2001, 2004). The questions in relation to employability were derived from the theoretical work of Holmes (2013) and Tomlinson (2010, 2012) both of whom explore how graduates understand and articulate the link between their participation in HE and future activities in the labour market (Tomlinson 2012, p. 423). This section of the interview schedule dealt mainly with the theme of employability and how graduates perceive this to have been impacted by successful completion of an honours degree.

The challenge for me as an interviewer was to ‘interact with research participants in such a way that they generate rich and complex insights’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 98). While a number of questions were prepared, the semi-structured interview allows for improvisation during the actual interview. The ‘improvisation’ however, is informed (Wengraf 2001, p. 5), commencing with some pre-defined questioning but moving on to a more conversational approach (O’Leary 2006, p. 164). Robson (2002, p. 278) refers to this style as the ‘shopping list of topics’ where the interviewer knows what they want to cover but the wording, sequence and timing of questions is flexible. Although the structure is flexible, the interview must be carefully planned and facilitate rigorous analysis. According to Wengraf (2001, p. 5) semi-structured interviews are:

‘...high preparation, high risk, high gain and high analysis operations’

#### **4.6.4 LinkedIn**

This study also employed LinkedIn to supplement other sources of data in relation to graduate outcomes, both in terms of employment and further education and training. Goodwin (2006, p. 6) points out that keeping track of graduates is challenging since 'as they move on with their lives, they move away from their college experiences'. However, technology can help provide some solutions to this problem.

LinkedIn is becoming an important source of information in relation to graduates. Alumni can be notoriously difficult to locate often changing address or moving jobs with consequent changes to email addresses. This can result in low response rates to graduate surveys. LinkedIn allows institutions to keep in touch with their graduates and otherwise track their careers (Feldstein 2015). LinkedIn provides data on the career progression of graduates, together with details of what additional training and education they undertook. Although the data is self-reported, this is somewhat ameliorated by the fact that it is in the public arena. According to Feldstein (2015, p. 1) LinkedIn 'has the data to study long-term career outcomes of education in a broad and meaningful way. Nobody else comes close. Not even the government.'

Within my research study LinkedIn had limited use. Although I knew the names of all graduates, many of the names were popular, thus limiting their traceability on LinkedIn. As I did not know the exact employer of graduates it was not possible to identify them on LinkedIn on this basis either. Where LinkedIn proved extremely useful was in identifying the profile of interviewees and examining how they presented their HE degree credential in the LinkedIn forum.

## 4.7 Data collection

### 4.7.1 Pilot stage

Pre-testing or piloting a survey is important in order to iron out any difficulties. The survey was piloted on:

- A sample of three former distance graduates, who would not be part of the research sample
- Four senior DCU personnel who were familiar with the research project

The former graduates were engaged in ‘disclosed’ pretesting (de Vaus 1991, p. 99) i.e. they were advised about the purpose of the research, and were asked for their feedback on the survey. DCU senior academic staff, involved in distance education, were also consulted about the proposed research and feedback on the survey was invited. Respondents were asked to comment on the layout, design and content of the survey. They were asked to consider whether anything important was omitted or anything inappropriate was included. Additionally, the pilot served to confirm the time it would take to complete the online survey and whether it was running accurately and consistent in all popular web browsers.

One commentator stated that the question in relation to age was unclear, stating that respondents may not be sure whether or not to give their current age, the age they commenced studies or the age at which they graduated. The question on socio-economic background generated most discussion. While it was important to employ the categories used by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in order to contextualise the study, six commentators mentioned that the category ‘homemaker’ should be included as otherwise many respondents may not know where to include this category. The question on previous education attainment also gave rise to some ambiguity, so the question was re-phrased accordingly.

The final section of the survey had included a question asking whether respondents would be willing to participate in an interview. It was suggested that this question should be omitted as it would be impossible to contact those who had said they did not want to be interviewed. This could seriously restrict interview options. If the question was omitted all graduates could be regarded as potential candidates for interview and approached as such. This question was therefore omitted.

In general, since all commentators had great experience with the student cohort, all suggestions were incorporated into the final survey.

There are difficulties piloting an interview which is exploratory and emergent in nature (Charmaz 2006). Nevertheless any interview process is vulnerable to bias (Gall et al. 2007). A pilot was carried out to highlight any problems with the proposed interview schedule. Two former graduates, together with a senior DCU distance staff member were approached to pilot the interview process and identify what they perceived of as any problems with the proposed schedule. The pilot also helped to confirm, with some degree of accuracy, how long each interview might take, whether the wording of questions was appropriate and, without being too prescriptive, whether there was a logical flow to the questions. The interview pilot helped to address the following questions:

- Was there any level of discomfort with the questions?
- Is there a problem with the tone of the interview?
- Are the questions leading?
- Is the interview more directional than is necessary? (Interview is a directed conversation-Lofland and Lofland 1984, 1995)
- Are the questions judgemental?
- Am I helping the interviewee articulate their intentions and meanings? (Charmaz 2006)
- Am I encouraging reflection?
- Am I interrogating?
- Do the questions flow?
- What is the best way to start?
- Should I open with some information about myself?
- Am I addressing the research questions?

#### **4.7.2 Survey stage**

The surveys were issued to all those who graduated with a level 8 degree between 2011/12 and 2014/15 inclusive (n=268). The survey stage consisted of two phases. In Phase One the Graduate Survey was sent to graduates from 2011/12 and 2012/13 in November 2013 and graduates from 2013/14 and 2014/15 in the November following their graduation. The survey was sent soon after graduation so that participants' experience would be fresh in their memories. The response rate to this survey was 47% (n=126). Table 4.3 illustrates the numbers of graduates surveyed.

**Table 4.3.** Numbers of graduates surveyed

<b>Distance graduates</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>Total</b>
Graduate total	83	74	58	53	268
Graduate Survey Respondents	33	33	29	31	126
Employability Survey Respondents	18	19	29	31	97

The Employability Survey was issued to all graduates (n=268) from the target years at the end of 2015. The response rate to the Employability Survey was 36% (n=97). The difference in response rates between the two surveys likely related to the delay in sending the Employability Survey to earlier graduates (though this was intentional as it gave them more time to assess the impact of the degree on their employability). Additionally, some graduates were not in employment and may have regarded the survey as irrelevant to them (even though this point was addressed in the survey with those who were unemployed asked for their views).

The survey phase involved a number of elements which were repeated several times over the course of the study to facilitate data collection from 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015 graduates. Firstly, advance notice of the survey is important to maximise response rates (Scheuren 2004). This condition was met as all those who had graduated with a level 8 degree were emailed to both their personal e-mail address (on record) and their DCU email address with notification of the survey. The email outlined the aims of the study and asked graduates to participate. The email included a link to the online survey prepared in survey monkey. Ethical considerations were observed around informing participants of the voluntary nature of the survey and how the survey would be used. In order to maximise the chances of a high response rate two strategies were adopted:

- Respondents were included in a draw for an Android Tablet device if they completed the survey by a particular deadline
- Respondents received two e-mail reminders regarding the survey

Participants were advised that they could, however, still complete the survey beyond the deadline for the draw. Secondly, once the deadline had expired, and the responses were low, a reminder email was sent to all participants (with the exception of forty (n=40) graduates

whose email address was established as no longer in use). This level of follow up was necessary to ensure a good response rate to the survey as one of the problems with surveying graduates is that they have already left the university and, given the difficult economic circumstances which prevailed at the time the study was taking place, many may have changed, or indeed lost, employment and so changed personal email addresses and/or postal address.

All graduates were over 18 years of age. Participation in the online survey was voluntary. Participation implied informed consent in this context.

#### **4.7.3 Interview stage**

All graduates were regarded as potential interview candidates. It was decided to conduct all interviews face to face as far as possible. This has many advantages. Because of the social cues it is possible to observe the interviewee comfort level with each question. It is also easier to decide when to probe deeper or when to move on. Face-to-face interviewing allows for observation of interviewee reactions. The interviewer can note impressions created by the interview and the relationship constructed during the interview. If face-to-face interviewing proved difficult or impossible, Skype or telephone interviews would be substituted, but only as a last resort.

Those who were selected for interview were initially contacted by phone to explain the purpose of the research and the interview and to request their participation. This call was followed up with an e-mail confirming the research purpose and process of the interview in more detail. Participants were asked to complete informed consent documentation and were provided with a Plain Language Statement. Those who were selected for interview were asked what time suited them best. They received a web text to confirm the time and date of the interview. Eight interviews were held in DCU as it was both known to the graduates and afforded privacy. Five interviews took place on Skype, two interviews took place in the graduates' workplace and two were arranged in a hotel. All interviews were arranged at a time to suit interviewees. This necessitated some interviews taking place in the evening or on Saturdays. All interviews were recorded in line with consent secured on the informed consent form.

## **4.8 Participant selection**

### **4.8.1 Survey participants**

In quantitative research much is made about the selection of the 'sample' when gathering data. The word 'sample' carries connotations of representation. In qualitative research we know that participants represent only themselves. They are chosen for the richness and depth their experience brings to the study. I am fortunate to be in a position to be able to identify all graduates. The survey was therefore sent to all graduates who had graduated in 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015. In quantitative terminology I employed convenience sampling. This type of sampling is used widely in education research where it is not possible, or essential for the purpose of the research, to generalise to an entire population.

### **4.8.2 Interview participants**

It was important to extend the pool of interviewees beyond recent graduates in order to access those who had spent a longer time frame in the labour market. Additionally, a small number of graduates who had gone on to complete further study (either at Masters or PhD level) were also interviewed. I selected those who I felt would bring most to the research. Quantitative researchers employ the term 'purposive' sampling in the same vein.

At the start of the process it was determined that between fifteen and twenty graduates should be interviewed. To ensure this target would be met, thirty-three graduates were identified for interview. This allowed for non-response or non-participation for some members of the group. Table 4.4 illustrates the profile of interviewees, potential and actual. Table 4.5 illustrates the reasons why some candidates were not interviewed while table 4.6 illustrates the year of graduation of all those approached for interview.

Every effort was made to replicate, as closely as possible, the overall graduate population when selecting candidates for interview. It was endeavoured to ensure the sample was representative to the extent that graduates who were in fact in the minority were not over sampled. A comparison of the characteristics of the total graduate population and the interviewees is outlined in table 4.7. The majority of interviewees were male (53%) and had graduated with a BA degree (53%). It was decided to over-select from the BSc programmes to ensure graduates were compared across courses. BSc graduates are therefore over-

represented in the interviewee population. Graduates resident in Ireland and Dublin are also over-represented as they proved easier to recruit, possibly because graduates preferred to be interviewed in person rather than online. Those who attained a first class honours classification are also over-represented; they proved more willing to be interviewed.

Men were slightly more willing to be interviewed than women (53% compared to 50% for women). More men than women did not respond to contact (41% compared to 25%) but women sometimes made appointments which they did not keep (19%) (Table 4.5 refers).

In the final analysis seventeen graduates were interviewed as part of this research. Twelve of the interviewees had completed the Graduate Survey and volunteered a willingness to be interviewed within the survey. Five interviewees had graduated some years previously, one in 2001, two in 2007 and two in 2008. These interviewees were recruited through convenience sampling. One had completed a Masters in DCU and was contactable as the email address was up to date. Another graduate was contacted through the alumni association. A third had completed some tutoring and expressed an interest in contributing to the research. Two heard about the study and presented themselves as candidates for interview.



**Table 4.4.** Profile of interviewees (potential and actual)

Characteristic	Interviewees	Unsuccessful Interviewee selection
Degree type	Frequency (17)	Frequency (16)
BA	10	10
BSc	7	6
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	9	8
Female	8	8
<b>Age</b>		
18-29	1	3
30-39	8	8
40-49	6	5
50-59	2	
<b>Nationality</b>		
Irish	16	14
Other EU/EEA		1
Non EU/EEA	1	1
<b>Country of domicile</b>		
Ireland	17	16
<b>Province of domicile</b>		
Dublin	9	6
Rest of Leinster	5	3
Munster	2	3
Connaught	0	4
Ulster	1	
<b>Met university entry requirements</b>		
Yes	7	4
No	10	2
Missing		10
<b>Entry qualification level</b>		
Lower secondary		1
Upper secondary	9	3
Level 6 (higher certificate)	3	1
Level 6 (part-time)	2	2
Level 7 (diploma/ordinary degree)		2
Level 7 (part-time)	2	1
Level 8 (honours degree)		1
Level 8 (part-time)	1	
Level 9 (Masters' degree) or higher		
Level 9 or higher (part-time)		
Missing		5
<b>Accreditation for Prior Learning (APL)</b>		
APL	1	3
No APL/no prior learning	16	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>16</b>

**Table 4.5.** Potential interviewees: reasons for non-interview

Potential Interviewees (n)	BA		BSc		Male		Female		Total	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Interviewed	50%	10	54%	7	53%	9	50%	8	52%	17
No response to email or phone messages	30%	6	38%	5	41%	7	25%	4	33%	11
Did not turn up/ in scheduled interview	15%	3					19%	3	9%	3
Willing to be interviewed but could not agree time	5%	1	8%	1	6%	1	6%	1	6%	2
Total	100%	20	100%	13	100%	17	100%	16	100%	33

**Table 4.6.** Interview requests by year of graduation

Year graduated	Interviewed	Unsuccessful interview attempt	Total
	Frequency	Frequency	
2001	1		1
2007	2		2
2008	2		2
2012	4	4	8
2013	3	7	10
2014	2	3	5
2015	3	2	5
Total	17	16	33

**Table 4.7.** Profile of interviewees compared to general profile of graduate population

Characteristic	Graduate population		Interviewees	
Degree type	Percent*	Frequency (268)	Percent*	Frequency (17)
BA	74	198	59	10
BSc	26	70	41	7
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	57	140	53	9
Female	43	128	47	8
<b>Age</b>				
18-29	6	15	6	1
30-39	37	100	47	8
40-49	35	93	35	6
50-59	16	42	12	2
60-69	5	14		0
70-79	1	4		0
<b>Nationality</b>				
Irish	92	247	94	16
Other EU/EEA	6	16		
Non EU/EEA	2	5	6	1
<b>Country of domicile</b>				
Ireland	95	253	100	17
Other EU/EEA	3	9		
Non EU/EEA	2	6		
<b>Province of domicile</b>				
Dublin	34	90	53	9
Rest of Leinster	30	80	29	5
Munster	23	62	12	2
Connaught	5	13		0
Ulster	3	8	6	1
<b>Met university entry requirements</b>				
Yes	35	93	41	7
No	26	69	59	10
Missing	39	106		
<b>Entry qualification level</b>				
Lower secondary	4	13		
Upper secondary	30	79	53	9
Level 6 (higher certificate)	8	21	18	3
Level 6 (part-time)	17	45	12	2
Level 7 (diploma/ordinary degree)	5	12		
Level 7 (part-time)	10	28	12	2
Level 8 (honours degree)	3	8		
Level 8 (part-time)	1	4	5	1
Level 9 (Masters' degree) or higher	2	5		
Level 9 or higher (part-time)	1	2		
Missing	19	51		
<b>Accreditation for Prior Learning (APL)</b>				
APL	25	67	6	1
No APL/no prior learning	75	201	94	16
<b>Classification of award</b>				
H1	28	76	47	8
H2.1	54	143	41	7
H2.2	17	45	6	1
H3	1	4	6	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>268</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>17</b>

## **4.9 Data analysis**

### **4.9.1 Archival records analysis**

Internal archival records, specifically graduate application forms, supplemented where necessary by registration information (for example, if the age or domicile of a graduate was not noted on their application form) were used as a source of data in this study.

An Excel file was set up for each of the four academic years of this study. Within this file data relating to, for example, age, gender, prior educational attainment, accreditation at entry for prior learning, location while studying, employer, job title, was recorded. Little, if any, data on the socio-economic background of participants was archived.

This data was analysed in a similar manner to the survey data and interviews, that is, the quantitative data was analysed descriptively using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) while the qualitative data was analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006). The archival data helped construct a profile for each graduate at the commencement of their studies.

The data from the archival records is presented separately in the pre-participation section of Chapter 5, the Findings chapter.

### **4.9.2 Survey analysis**

All survey data gathered was confidential and voluntary. The data gathered from closed questions was anonymised and prepared for computation of averages, totals and other relevant statistics (Pallant 2010). The software chosen for this purpose was SPSS. Detailed analysis of the data is included in Chapter 5. The survey allowed the establishment of the frequency of certain responses. SPSS also facilitated the visual presentation of the data in a format which could be easily read and understood. Responses to open questions were analysed thematically.

#### 4.9.3 Interview analysis

When analysing qualitative data it is important to adopt a systematic process. Robson (1993, p. 377) proffers some basic rules for dealing with qualitative data as soon as possible after it had been gathered which involve:

- Ordering and filing the data
- Analyzing and indexing the data
- Dissecting the data
- Generating themes and categories
- Reflecting on the data
- Questioning findings

This process can be facilitated by computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS 2007). There are many benefits to using such software, summarised as follows by Seale (2005):

- Speed at handling large volumes of data allowing the researcher more time to devote to analysis
- Ease of counting the occurrence of certain phenomena and identifying deviant cases which aids rigour
- Consistent coding schemes which can facilitate team research

There are of course alternative views. Some feel that CAQDAS can cause the researcher to lose touch with the data (Fielding and Lee 1998). Rubin and Rubin (2005, pp. 243-244) contend:

Analysis is not about how many times a concept or theme appears, but the strength of the evidence on which those themes and concepts depend and on the importance of the concepts and themes in building a theory.

Computer packages can only assist with the process, the real work of ordering, questioning, dissecting, reflecting and generating themes and categories must be done by the researcher. In order to fully understand the data I wanted to immerse myself in it. To do this I employed a system of data analysis known as thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), supported with Microsoft word and excel packages.

#### **4.9.4 Thematic analysis**

Braun and Clarke (2006) promote thematic analysis as an appropriate form of data analysis in qualitative research. They define thematic analysis as ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (2006, p. 79). However, thematic analysis can go beyond this and ‘interpret aspects of the research topic’ (Boyatzis 1998). It is a flexible method, compatible with the constructionist paradigm as it helps to explore ways in which meaning, experience, and realities are socially constructed. Thematic analysis has the potential to facilitate a ‘rich, detailed and complex’ account of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 78). While researchers normally go to some lengths to account for ‘what’ they are doing and ‘why’, the ‘how’ dimension is often omitted (Attride-Stirling 2001). This ‘how’ dimension will be personal, as themes reside, not in the data, but in the head and heart of the researcher. The links that are created between the data and emerging themes are those that the researcher sees as important. It is imperative therefore that the researcher makes explicit what it is they want to know and their reasons for selecting themes.

According to Braun and Clarke a good thematic analysis will make the assumptions underlying the theoretical framework clear (2006, p. 81). The data in this study was analysed using a socio-cultural framework relating to *habitus*, *field* and *capital* from the work of Bourdieu (1979, 1986). Themes were framed within a social reproduction lens to explore whether background factors impact on outcomes of distance graduates.

#### ***Analysing data using thematic analysis***

This stage of the process was organised in two phases. The first phase involved the analysis of individual accounts. The second phase was concerned with more general descriptions of themes across all accounts. The overarching concern with this process is to endeavour to understand the participant’s implicit meaning and then to capture that specific meaning through the identification of a particular theme. This process is undertaken for the whole transcribed text.

#### **Step 1-Data Familiarisation**

All qualitative data were transcribed in detail. Interview transcriptions were checked against the recordings for accuracy. This stage also entailed writing down initial ideas emerging from

the data. This process involved a 'rigorous and thorough orthographic transcript-a verbatim account of all verbal (and sometimes nonverbal) utterances' (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 88).

### Step 2-Data Coding

The second step involved the development of a coding framework. In order to assist with the process of identifying codes I turned the transcribed text into a table and then created a second column to which I would add codes which I felt were appropriate to participants' talk. (Further columns could be added as the coding progressed to allow for the inclusion of additional notes.)

Next I identified and underlined those sections of the data which I felt particularly addressed the research questions. The idea of underlining the data comes from Pendry (1997). It is also posited by Bryman (2001) who emphasises the importance of keeping surrounding data in order to maintain context. While this process relates to what is regarded as a more 'theory-driven' approach (Braun and Clarke 2006) I combined this with a 'data-driven' approach (ibid) to ensure that any interesting but unexpected ideas or references emerging from the data, especially those that did not fit with the story of the research, were not overlooked. No data reduction took place at this stage.

Attride-Stirling (2001) advises not to code every sentence but yet code for as many potential themes as possible. When the coding list was completed it was examined in order to eliminate duplicate codes. The data was not allocated to themes at this stage.

### Step 3-Theme Search

Next I considered how various codes might group together as themes. This involved moving my focus away from coding towards a broader, 'theme' focus. A theme is defined as 'a way to get at meaning and describe it, as a means to give shape and form to meaning, and is always a reduction from it' (Van Manen 1990, p. 88). My intention was to employ Bourdieu's conceptual framework of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* as a lens through which to view the data. These concepts were the focus of how codes were grouped thematically within this research study.

Themes were not only generated from vivid disclosures. They often emerged from direct quotes from the talk of participants. Alternatively they might be something which I have drawn from the data. For example, interviewees presented to me as mostly unconscious of the fact

that they continued to internally identify with a job they had held for a number of years, prior to degree completion and subsequent career change. While I coded this as 'no self left behind' I understood that as a theme, it related to *habitus*.

#### Step 4-Theme Review

Once themes have been decided a refining process gets underway. The purpose here is to reduce the data. Themes should not only be significant but also represent the whole text in a meaningful and complete way. The extracts for each theme are re-read to ensure they form a cohesive pattern. If they do not, either the data is moved to an alternative theme or discarded if irrelevant. Data within themes should hang together coherently.

#### Step 5-Developing the Thematic Network

Once I was satisfied that I had accurately connected the coded data to themes I underwent a 'standing-back' or reflection process whereby I reviewed the overall thematic analysis to ensure it reflected my understanding of the meaning of the data. Next I assembled themes into groups based on their content or their relationship to the theoretical framework or research questions.

Once this review has taken place I went through all the text segments to ensure (i) the themes reflected the data and (ii) the data could support the selected themes.

In the final analysis, thematic analysis does not necessitate creating themes; it does necessitate identifying them. Within the data, Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* were clearly identifiable.

#### Step 6 –Exploring the Network

The thematic network is the analysis tool. Once it has been decided, I returned to the original text and set about interpreting it using the thematic network. This step knitted together the data and the interpretation tool. This in turn facilitated deeper analysis.

#### Step 7– Reporting on the data analysis

The final report attempts to relate the meaning from the qualitative data to an academic analysis of why people choose distance education, how they experience the field of HE and



how being a distance graduate impacts employability. Bourdieu's conceptual framework assisted me in describing, exploring and analysing the data but it is also a tool to assist the reader in understanding my interpretation and summary of the data.

#### **4.10 Presentation of the data**

The findings for this study are presented in three sections. Within each section relevant data is drawn as appropriate from institutional records, the survey and the interviews. In each case the data source is highlighted. This format was deemed most suitable as it makes for a more meaningful and insightful presentation. When reporting qualitative data, in order to preserve the anonymity of participants their age is categorized as follows: 18-39 = Young (Y), 40-59= Middle aged (M), and 60+ = Old (O).

#### **4.11 Ethical considerations**

Ethical issues must be considered throughout, and will inform, the whole research project. On a fundamental level ethical considerations will relate to the avoidance of harm, and ideally result in societal benefits, as a result of the research undertaken. While the discovery of new data is important, it is the extent to which the data is significant and valuable to the lives of others that is of key relevance. Kant (in Sullivan 1994) advises us never to treat people as a mere means to an end. How we engage our participants, what we tell them, how we protect them, each of these become ethical issues in research. Robson (2002) also includes how we present the work of others and the help from others as ethical concerns.

An additional concern for me as researcher, since I hold a position in the case study institution, is with what McNamee and Bridges (2002) refer to as 'insider research'. Insider research must be especially vigilant to ensure that participants do not feel pressurised to respond in a certain manner in order to please the researcher. Additionally, the researcher must be aware of personal biases when interpreting results. I will address both points separately.

Ethical approval was sought and granted by DCU's Ethics Committee for this research. As an employee of the case study institution, I have worked for many years with distance students. Knowledge and understanding, distilled from experience, lends strength to the researcher's position. At the same time, because the research participants are graduates, they are in no way

beholden to the researcher. There is little, if any, possibility that they will feel under any obligation to participate in the study, to complete a survey, to attend for interview or to otherwise comply with any request by the researcher. Those who have completed their programme of study, and left the university, are less likely to be concerned with pleasing me, as researcher, with their feedback.

All participants in the research received information about the research and were given an opportunity to ask questions. Additionally, all participants were made aware of the confidential aspect of the research. Under university regulations participants have a right to privacy and confidentiality. Consequently participants were advised that all transcripts and surveys would be anonymised.

The code of ethics around surveys includes the following: anonymity of respondents, confidentiality of the data and destruction of the data after use. Scheuren (2004, p. 14) emphasises that questions should be fair and asserts that:

Surveys should be carried out solely to develop statistical information about a subject. They should not be designed to produce predetermined results or as a ruse for marketing and similar activities.

Regarding the issue of researcher bias, qualitative research inevitably involves some level of interpretation by the researcher. It is important that the researcher's interpretation is accurate, credible and transparent. However, it is unlikely that it will be objective. I endorse the view of Alexiadou (2001) who states: 'I am seeking to avoid bias, rather than trying to convince as to the neutrality of my approach' (p. 55). I tried to avoid bias by taking the following steps:

- Explicating the theoretical assumptions which underpin the research
- Providing a detailed account of all procedures undertaken in the research
- Submitting procedures and interpretations for peer review at each critical stage of the research process, in line with the constructivist approach
- Seeking participant validation of my interpretation of interviews, again in line with the constructivist paradigm where knowledge is 'created in interaction among investigator and respondents' (Guba and Lincoln 1994, p. 111).

On a final ethical point all participants in this research were adults over 18 years of age.

## **4.12 Validity and reliability**

### **4.12.1 Construct validity**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) together with Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen (1993) discuss establishing 'trustworthiness' and 'authenticity' to endeavour to ensure validity in research. Construct validity comes about through robust methods of research design which help ensure against researcher bias. Yin (2014, p. 46) identifies construct validity as 'identifying correct operational measures for the concepts being studied'. Merriam (1988) stresses how we must describe the procedures we have put in place such as our plans for triangulation regarding different sources of data, different methods of data collection, getting feedback from participants (referred to as 'member checks') on the accuracy of our conclusions and otherwise minimising the distance between researcher and participant, in order to ensure construct validity. This research involved the use of 'multiple sources of evidence' with a view to establishing links within that evidence. I endeavoured to limit researcher bias by ensuring the analysis and interpretation of the data was presented to my thesis supervisors for examination and questioning. It was also disseminated through conference presentations and journal publications and as such subjected to peer review. Throughout the research process multiple perspectives were employed in line with the constructivist paradigm.

### **4.12.2 Internal validity**

Case study is a 'triangulated research strategy' (Tellis 1997a). Stake (1995) defines triangulation as the protocols that are used to ensure accuracy and alternative explanations. For Yin (1984) multiple sources of data provide triangulation in case study methodology. In this project I have employed data from various sources; archival records, surveys, interviews, and LinkedIn (Tellis 1997b). I have also used a mixed methods approach, employing both quantitative and qualitative data.

Yin (2014) relates the problem of internal validity to one of inferences. Can we trust the researchers' inferences? The answer is 'yes' only if we know that all alternative possibilities and explanations have been considered and addressed and the evidence is incontrovertible. There is a general understanding that researches always bring their own interests and values to the

research (Charmaz 2006; Potter and Wetherell 1995). This is likely to be most evident in the analysis of the data. In order to balance this I have endeavoured to make explicit the theoretical assumptions on which this research is built. I have also outlined, in detail, the methodological procedures followed together with steps taken to ensure validity and reliability.

#### **4.12.3 External validity**

The issue of external validity or generalisation in the context of case studies has been much discussed in the literature (Yin 1981, 2012; Merriam 1988; Creswell 1994; Geering 2007; Robson 2011). Case studies rely on evidence taken from a single case. For this reason 'problems of representativeness' (Geering 2007, p. 43) or generalisability are associated with case studies. Yin (2014 p. 48) asserts that there are two types of generalising: statistical and analytic. For case study research, according to Yin, analytic generalisation is appropriate. Such generalisations are possible when the theoretical framework of the research establishes a logic which could be applied in other similar situations. Yin (2012, p. 18) describes this as a 'two-step process' which proceeds as follows:

The first step involves a conceptual claim whereby investigators show how their study's findings have informed the relationships among a particular set of concepts, theoretical constructs, or sequence of events. The second step involves applying the same theoretical propositions to implicate other situations, outside the completed case study, where similar concepts, constructs, or sequences might be relevant.

In summary case studies are more focused on internal rather than external validity (Geering 2007, p. 35). The aim of the case study is simply that, to study the case.

#### **4.12.4 Reliability**

Reliability refers to the chance of replicating a study and its findings in another setting (Creswell 1994). The more unique a study is the more difficult it will be to replicate it. To aid reliability I outlined in detail the steps taken to operationalize this study. I have included a detailed protocol for data collection and analysis as recommended by Yin (1989). This detail of information helps ensure the reliability of this study and also its usefulness in another setting.

### **4.13 Limitations of the study**

This study is restricted to the experience of part-time distance graduates in one Irish institution. It cannot be assumed that the experience of all part-time and/or distance graduates will be the same. Therefore the graduates in this study cannot be regarded as representative.

Provision of part-time and distance education is not standardised. Additionally, sometimes students participate reluctantly in part-time courses, particularly those related to labour market activation. Motivation and outcomes may be very different for part-time graduates of such courses.

The data in this study is self-reported. Participants may consciously, or unconsciously, misrepresent the truth. Additionally, the approach is interpretative and is characterised by this feature.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the data relating to DCU distance graduates accurately reflects the demographic profile and prior educational attainment in full-time education of the entire group of distance graduates for the years covered by the study i.e. 2012 -2015 inclusive. The interviews are analysed and some conclusions are drawn on the basis of that analysis. However, the data relates to this case study only and no generalization beyond this case is claimed.

### **4.14 Summary**

This chapter has outlined the rationale for the design of this study and for the choice of research methodology. An argument for the use of case study was presented and validated. A review of the relevant literature was incorporated in the chapter. An explanation of the aims and objectives of the study has been presented, together with a description of the various data collection instruments. A thorough and original approach to the study of part-time distance graduates in Irish higher education has been presented.

## 5 Findings and Discussion

It is not ability that is unevenly distributed in our society. It is opportunity.  
(The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009, p. 7)

This study employs a social reproduction framework as a tool for data analysis with an emphasis on Bourdieu's constructs of *habitus*, *field* and *capital*; constructs which 'function fully only in relation to one another' (Naidoo 2004, p. 457). The findings from this research are examined in the light of three key experiential phases: the pre-participation phase, the participation phase and the post-participation employability phase.

The relationship between part-time HE graduates and Bourdieu's concepts is under-explored, and therefore poorly understood, in the literature. Bourdieu offers a framework to understand why some students proceed to university on completion of second level education and others do not. Additionally he is clear that 'lost years are a step towards relegation or elimination' (Bourdieu 1979, p. 104/5). However, Bourdieu's research was conducted some time ago, before the rise of globalization and online learning. Can the adaptive nature of *habitus* rise above the obstacles he outlines? In the complicated world of life chances where do agency and structure reside? This chapter contributes to our understanding of social class and part-time HE participation in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Within this chapter, relevant data is drawn as appropriate from institutional records, survey instruments and semi-structured interviews. Findings from institutional records are primarily reported in the pre-participation phase. Survey findings are reported in the pre-participation and participation phases. Interview findings are reported in each of the three phases. In each case the data source is highlighted. Interviewee comments are distinguished by the pseudonym of the interviewee. This format was deemed most suitable as it makes for a more meaningful and insightful presentation. A profile of the interviewees is available in Appendix E. In order to preserve the anonymity of respondents when reporting qualitative data, their age is categorized as follows: 18-39 = Young (Y), 40-59= Middle aged (M), and 60+ = Older (O).

## **5.1 The pre-participation phase**

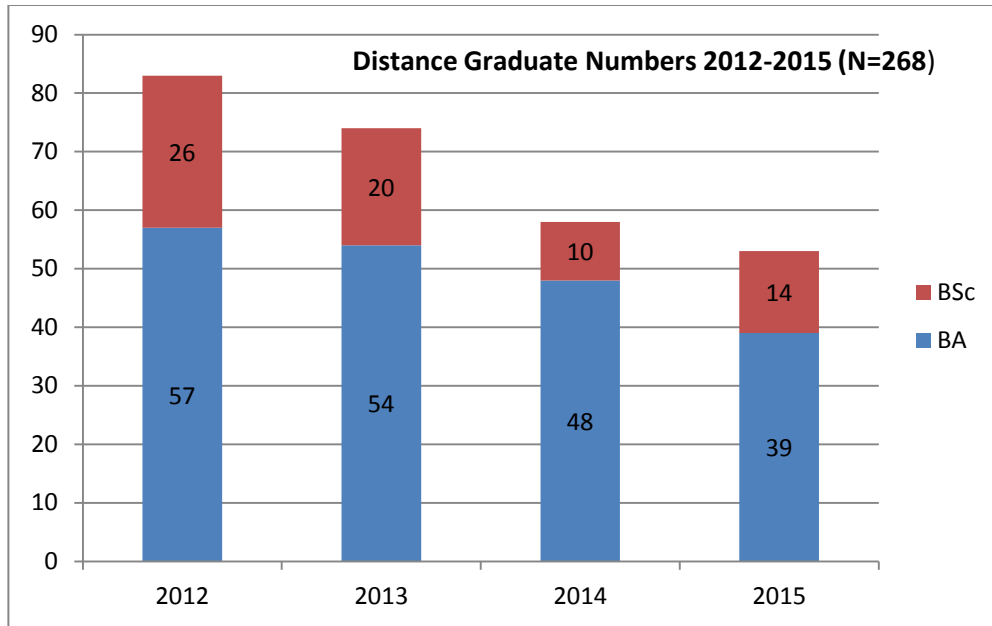
Distance learning is offered through the Open Education Unit at DCU. Five undergraduate degree programmes are provided: three under the Bachelor of Arts (BA) umbrella and two under the Bachelor of Science (BSc) umbrella. In general, findings will be reported separately for the BA and BSc degrees. The courses are at level 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications, and equate to Bologna first cycle qualifications.

For those over twenty-three years of age, entry to DCU's distance degree programmes is open; i.e. there are no minimum entry requirements. Those under 23 years old must meet the minimum entry requirements of the university, and non-native speakers of English must meet English language requirements. Potential applicants are targeted through social media, media advertising, annual open days, printed materials, and various adult education networks. Information about the courses is also available from the institutional website. (Detailed information regarding the application process is available in the methodology chapter.)

### **5.1.1 The distance graduate cohort**

Two hundred and sixty eight (n=268) students completed an undergraduate level 8 degree between 2012 and 2015 inclusive.

The number of students graduating has fallen year by year (Figure 5.1 refers). While an investigation of this issue is beyond the scope of this research there are a number of factors which likely impacted this fall in numbers. A severe recession in Ireland saw unemployment rise from 4.3% in 2006 to 14.7% in 2012 (CSO 2016). It is likely those who lost their jobs could not afford to participate in part-time higher education even if they wanted to. Additionally, we know from anecdotal evidence that employers who had previously supported staff participation in part-time HE financially, were either no longer prepared to do so, or were more specific in the courses they were prepared to support. For example, graduates working in banking relate how their employer stopped supporting some forms of third level education and began to specify support only for courses which related to banking or business.



**Figure 5.1.** Distance graduate numbers: 2012-2015

The demand for distance education may have fallen anyway, because of the overall rising participation rates in higher education. However, it is interesting to note that in 2011, when DCU secured approximately 130 funded distance learning places on a labour market activation scheme, places were oversubscribed with approximately 300 applications. When distance education was funded in a manner similar to full-time education, there was no shortage of demand.

## 5.1.2 General characteristics

### 5.1.2.1 Gender

The majority of distance graduates were male (Table 5.1 refers). This differs slightly from other Irish (Darmody and Fleming 2009) and international (Butcher 2015) findings which show that women are more likely to be part-time HE students. BA graduates were predominantly female (61%), while the vast majority of BSc graduates were male (90%), confirming that gender is most likely related to field of study rather than mode of study, with males more likely to participate in technology related degrees (Carnoy et al. 2012; Coldwell et al. 2008).



**Table 5.1.** Gender, age, nationality and domicile of 2012-2015 graduate cohort (N=268)

Characteristic	BA		BSc		Total Per cent	Total Base N (268)
	Per cent*	Base N (198)	Per cent*	Base N (70)		
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	39	77	90	63	57	140
Female	61	121	10	7	43	128
<b>Age</b>						
18-29	7	14	1	1	6	15
30-39	33	66	49	34	37	100
40-49	33	66	39	27	35	93
50-59	17	34	11	8	16	42
60-69	7	14			5	14
70-79	2	4			1	4
<b>Nationality</b>						
Irish	92	183	91	64	92	247
Other EU/EEA	5	10	9	6	6	16
Non EU/EEA	3	5			2	5
<b>Country of domicile</b>						
Ireland	94	187	94	66	95	253
Other EU/EEA	4	7	3	2	3	9
Non EU/EEA	2	4	3	2	2	6
<b>Province of domicile</b>						
Dublin	37	69	32	21	34	90
Rest of Leinster	34	64	24	16	30	80
Munster	21	40	33	22	23	62
Connaught	4	8	7	5	5	13
Ulster	3	6	3	2	3	8
Total						268

\*In all tables the asterisked per cent columns represent the percentage of graduates with that characteristic in that particular programme.

#### 5.1.2.2 Age

The largest single group of graduates (37% N=100) were in the 30-39 age group. One group whose percentage has risen between 2012 and 2015 are the 18-29 year old age group (from 3% in 2012 to 9% in 2015, and almost exclusively BA). International research indicates that distance learners are getting younger (Guiney 2014). Numbers in this study are small but confirm this trend.

### **5.1.2.3 Nationality and location while studying**

The majority of graduates were Irish nationals (92%). Most graduates lived in Ireland while studying (95%: see table 5.1). The number of non-Irish graduates has remained constant since 2012 - an average of five per year. Graduates living abroad are predominantly male (eleven out of fifteen) and are all Irish. The largest single group of graduates live in Dublin (34% N=90). Thereafter, the rest of Leinster accounts for 30% of graduate location<sup>10</sup> followed by Munster at 23%. Nine per cent (N=24) of graduates are living in Cork, followed by Meath and Kildare with 6% each (N=15 each).

The HEA (2015a) express their concern that those from affluent areas within Dublin are most likely to participate in university (Figure 5.2). Although numbers in this distance education study are small, the highest participating postal codes within Dublin for distance graduates are almost the opposite of those for full-time HE with 27% from Dublin County, 12% from Dublin 15, 8% from Dublin 9, 7% from Dublin 8, and 7% from Dublin 24 (Appendix F refers).

Additionally most undergraduate full-time participation in Ireland comes from counties with a vibrant HE sector (Figure 5.3 refers). While 34% (n=90) of distance graduates lived close to DCU, and a further 24% lived close to another university, 29% (n=77) of graduates lived in a region of Ireland which did not have a local University or HE institution. The opportunity for part-time HE study for people in these regions is very limited. Part-time distance education appears to be addressing geographical underrepresentation in a manner in which full-time, and possibly part-time campus based HE cannot, and is evidence of the enormous potential of digitally enhanced delivery.

## **5.1.3 Academic characteristics**

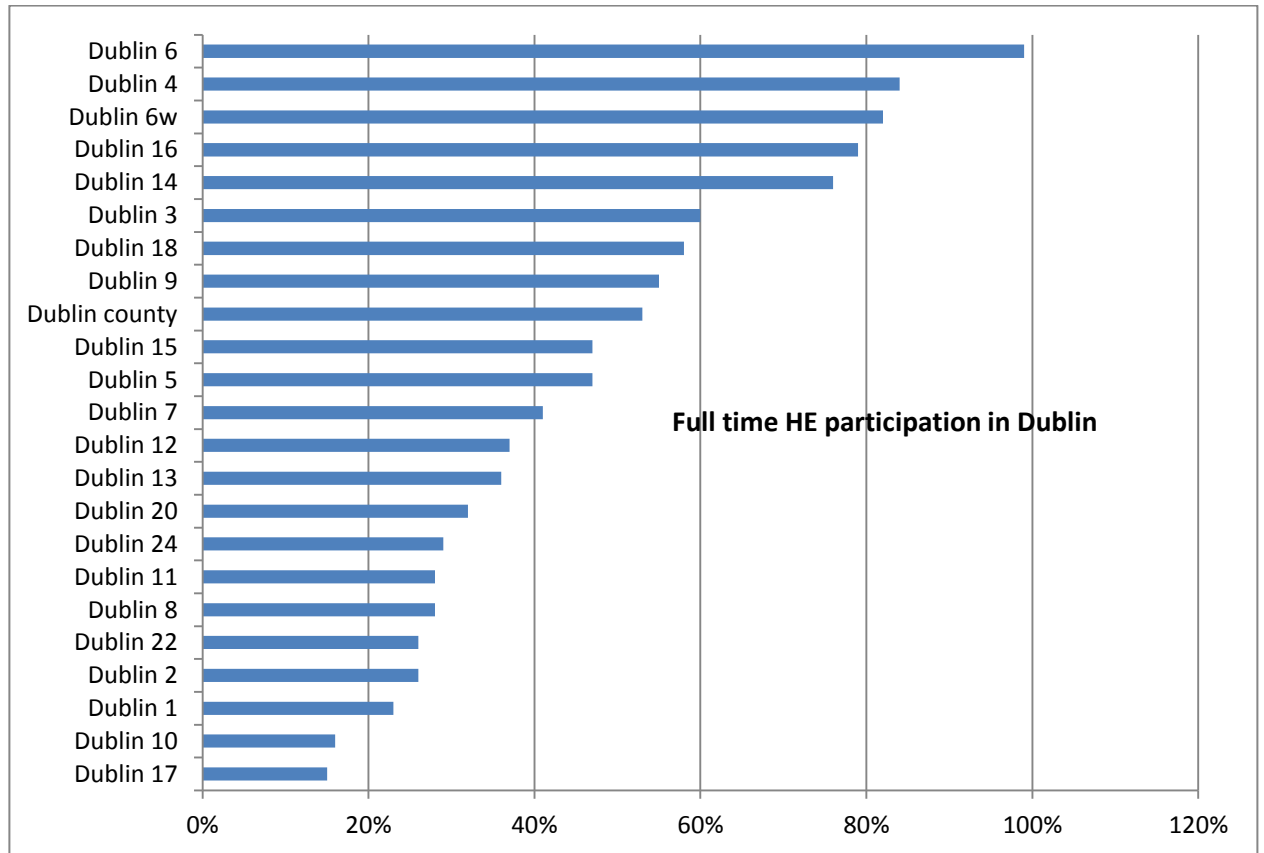
### **5.1.3.1 Degree type**

Research tells us that elite vocational degrees (e.g. medicine, engineering, teaching, nursing) have the best labour market outcomes (Birch et al. 2009; Kupfer 2011; Smyth and Strathdee 2010). There are resource implications involved in developing degree programmes for delivery through distance education. The number of degrees available in the case study institution is

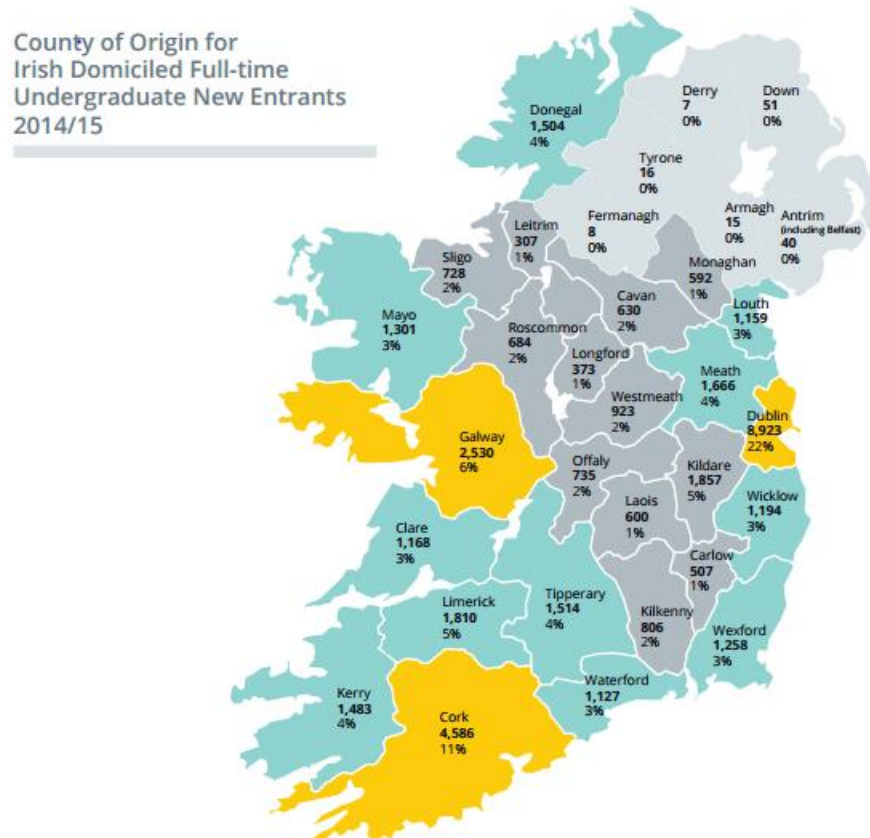
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<sup>10</sup> A more detailed breakdown is available in Appendix F

very limited amounting to, in effect, two undergraduate degrees with five related pathways.  
Most distance graduates (74%) completed a BA degree.



**Figure 5.2.** First-time undergraduate new entrants to HE aged 18–20 in the 2011/12 academic year as a percentage of the total number in that age cohort for the Dublin geographic area (HEA, 2015a, p. 44).



**Figure 5.3.** County or origin for Irish domiciled full-time undergraduate new entrants 2014/2015 (HEA, 2015b, p. 5)

### 5.1.3.2 Entry qualification level

The typology employed to categorise the entry qualification level of the graduates in this study is the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The prior education of graduates given in their application form was mapped to the NFQ. The Irish NFQ, established in 2003, facilitates the coherent measurement and relation of all education qualifications, both Irish and foreign.

Remarkably, a small group of graduates (4% N=13) had entered with only a Lower Second Level Qualification (Table 5.2 refers). A larger group (30% N=79) had entered with an Upper Second Level (Leaving Certificate or equivalent) qualification. Often working class students do not

perform well in the post-second level competition for university places. Many researchers see this competition as unjustly favoring more wealthy students who can invest more heavily in extra tuition to enhance their performance in university entry exams (Denny 2010; Lynch 2006). This process can serve to obscure middle-class advantage by dressing it in the cloak of 'natural ability' (Smart et al. 2009, p. 35). The net result can be that working class students may believe they are unsuitable for university level education (Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Reay 2001). Additionally, they are often first generation students and so, often enter university with limited academic and cultural capital (Bathmaker et al. 2013; Brown and Hesketh 2004; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Tomlinson 2012). Thirty-five per cent (N=93) of distance graduates stated that they met the entry requirements of the university (Table 5.2 refers). Twenty-three per cent of this group reported very good or excellent leaving certificate results. This group of first time mature entrants is specifically targeted and funded for increased participation in full-time HE (HEA 2015a, p. 34).

Forty per cent (N=106) of graduates entered with a pre-existing lower level HE qualification (this was more common for BSc graduates [55%] than for BA graduates [34%] – (Figures 5.4 and 5.5 respectively refer). This previous qualification was often completed on a part-time basis (68%, N=72). In this way distance students differ from the main body of full-time HE students, the majority (approximately 80%) of whom enters directly from second level education (Hyland 2011).

The literature outlines how adults tend to delay their participation in HE for reasons related to social class (Brine and Waller 2004; Croxford and Raffe 2014). The adults in this study had not necessarily delayed their participation. Many had been participating intermittently since they left school, often on a part-time basis, and were steadily building towards the attainment of an honours bachelor degree.

Research also identifies how working class students' participation in post-compulsory education is characterised by completion of lower status courses (Fleming and Finnegan 2011; McCoy et al. 2014) at non-university institutions (Alon 2009; Engle and Tinto 2008; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Gallacher 2009; Ianelli 2011; Smyth and McCoy 2009; Sutton Trust 2010; Woodfield 2011). These courses are chosen for a variety of reasons: lower entry requirements,

shorter duration etc. The pattern of participation in post-secondary education by graduates in this study is characteristically working class.

### ***5.1.3.3 Accreditation of prior learning (APL)***

Twenty five per cent of graduates received recognition for their prior formal learning by gaining exemptions from the requirement to complete some modules on their specific degree programmes. The exemptions ranged from 15 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) credits to 120 ECTS credits (Table 5.2 refers). A higher percentage of BSc graduates than BA graduates received recognition for prior learning (34% compared with 22%). However, when we consider that more BSc graduates entered with pre-existing qualifications we see that relatively speaking more 'eligible' BA students than BSc students attained APL (21% compared with 12%). There are reasons why students do not attain APL. Sometimes students do not apply for it (this is a requirement of the process). Other times the pre-existing qualification is not at an appropriate level or is very old and is deemed by the university to have lost currency (prior learning should be no more than eight years old in order to gain accreditation). This is more particularly the case for IT qualifications. The protracted participation in HE by the graduates often causes them to lose out on leveraging academic capital from previous credentials.

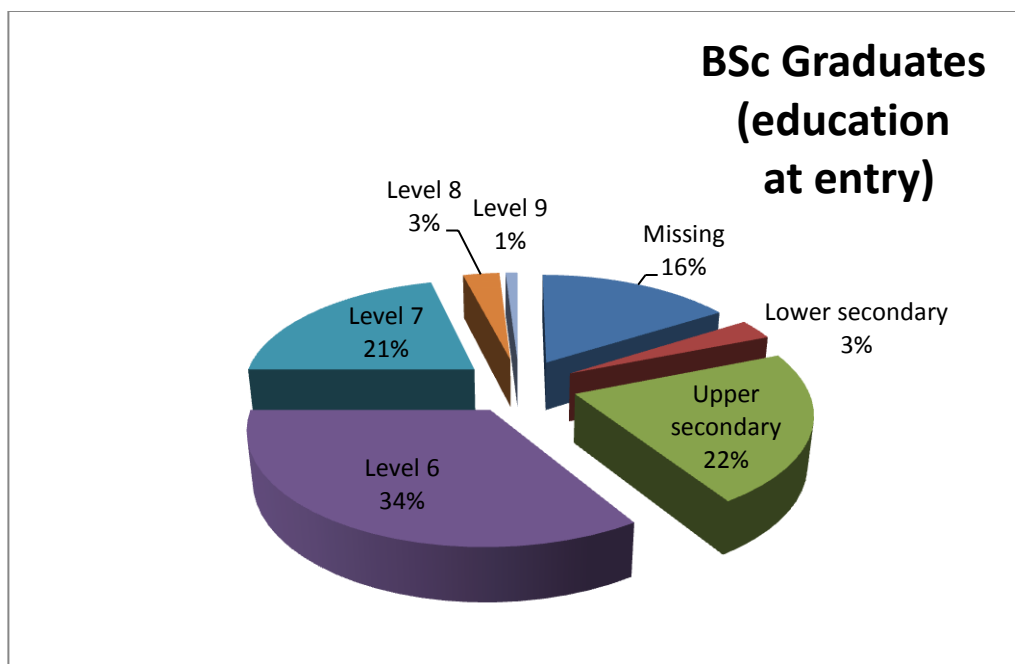
Part-time students do not receive any academic credits for course related employment. However, work placement is regularly part of full-time course provision for which students receive academic credits towards their final award.

The National Plan for Equity of Access to HE (HEA 2015a, p. 30) articulates a goal 'to build coherent pathways from further education and to foster other entry routes to higher education'. The mechanism to achieve this is focused on full-time higher education. It would seem imperative that we are realistic about the options students face, in particular working class students. Those who complete level 6 or level 7 courses after compulsory education may not be in a financial position to commit to an extensive number of years in the full-time HE system. Their parents/guardians are often anxious for them to enter the work force and begin to support themselves. If these students wish to top up a lower qualification the only option open to many of them is part-time or distance learning. The provision of a broad range of full and top up degree programmes to facilitate new flexible learners is important. Funding to

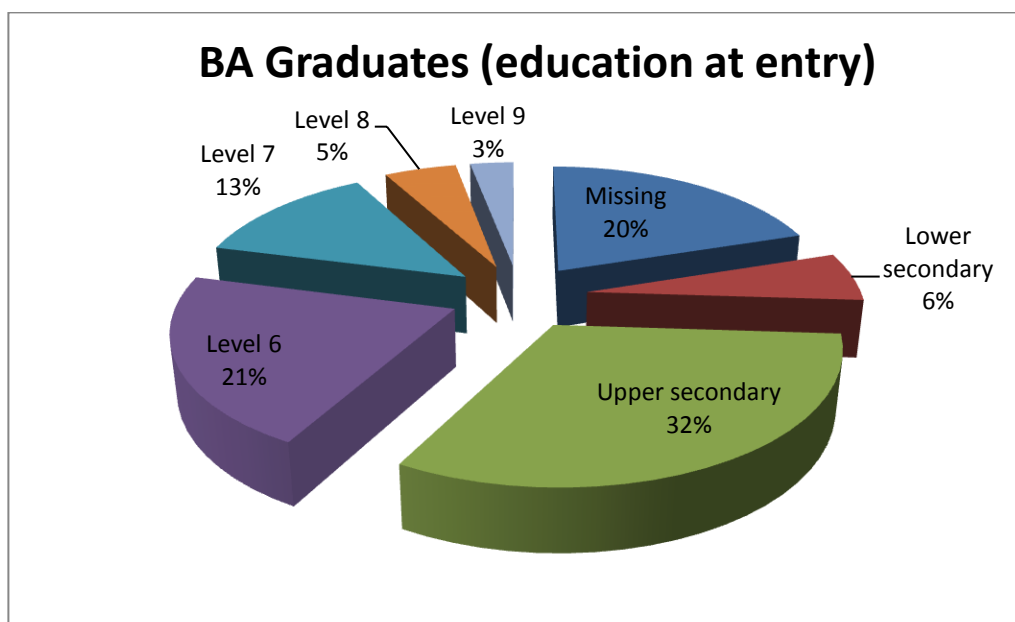
develop flexible course provision, within and between providers, is essential in order to maintain and develop access to university education for this cohort of learners.

**Table 5.2.** Academic characteristics of graduate population at entry

Characteristic	BA		BSc		Total	Total
	Per cent	Base N 198	Per cent	Base N 70	Per cent	Base N 268
<b>Met university entry requirements on completion of second level</b>						
Yes	36	71	32	22	35	93
No	27	54	21	15	26	69
Missing	37	73	47	33	39	106
<b>Entry qualification level</b>						
Lower secondary	6	11	3	2	4	13
Upper secondary	32	64	22	15	30	79
Level 6 (higher certificate)		8		13	8	21
Level 6 (part-time)	21	34	34	11	17	45
Level 7 (diploma/ordinary degree)		6		6	5	12
Level 7 (part-time)	13	19	21	9	10	28
Level 8 (honours degree)		7		1	3	8
Level 8 (part-time)	5	3	3	1	1	4
Level 9 (Masters' degree) or higher		5			2	5
Level 9 or higher (part-time)	3	1	1	1	1	2
Missing	20	40	16	11	19	51
<b>Accreditation for Prior Learning (APL)</b>						
15 ECTS (1 Exemption)	13	25	7	5	11	30
30 ECTS (2 Exemptions)	6	12	9	6	7	18
45 ECTS (3 Exemptions)	1	2	1	1	1	3
60 ECTS (4 Exemptions)	2	4	1	1	2	5
75 ECTS (5 Exemptions)			1	1		1
120 ECTS (Direct entry)			14	10	4	10
No APL/no prior learning	78	155	66	46	75	201
Total		198		70	100	268



**Figure 5.4.** BSc Graduates: Highest educational attainment at entry



**Figure 5.5.** BA Graduates: Highest educational attainment at entry



#### **5.1.4 Socio-economic status and background**

Within national surveys three different measures are used to determine social background:

*Principal economic status* identifies whether or not individuals are economically active, whether they are engaged in home duties, or whether they are retired (Table 5.3 refers).

*Socio economic group* classifies individuals in one of eleven socio-economic groups, used in the Census of Population, as outlined in Table 5.3.

*Social class* is a scale 'designed to classify the population according to an ordinal class structure' (CSO 2012b p.75, Clancy 2001). While there is no widely agreed definition of social class, occupation and education attainment remain the most widely used indicators. The occupational scale for social class relates closely to socio-economic group.

##### ***5.1.4.1 Principal economic status of graduates at entry***

The majority of graduates (69% n=185, Table 5.3 refers) were in employment when they commenced their studies. More men than women were in full-time employment (55% compared to 45%). Distance education is expensive - approximately €3,400 per sixty ECTS credits - so it is hardly surprising that most participants are in employment. This form of HE is not something one could readily commit to unless one has a relatively large disposable income or someone to financially support participation.

Fourteen (14) BSc graduates were unemployed at the start of their studies and availed of a national labour market activation funding scheme to participate. Two BA graduates (one unemployed, one in part-time employment) were funded under a state Assisted Study Programme designed to support those who were in difficult financial circumstances to return to higher education. This latter scheme was phased out when government funding was withdrawn from distance education provision (2009).

##### ***5.1.4.2 Employment Sector at entry***

Employment in the private sector appears more common (46% n=123), in particular for those who completed a BSc degree. Twenty-three per cent (n=61) of graduates worked in the public sector and 1% in the Not for Profit/Charity sector (remaining 30% of data is missing).

#### ***5.1.4.3 Employment classification at entry***

In order to classify the type of economic activity graduates had been engaged in at entry to the programme, the statistical classification of economic activities in the European Union (NACE) (2008) was employed. The abbreviation NACE is derived from the French *Nomenclature statistique des activités économiques dans la Communauté européenne*. The coding facilitates the presentation of a large range of employment related data. This classification consists of nineteen (19) categories (see Table 5.3). For those employed in the public sector, education was the dominant category (41% N=25) with Health & Social Work second (16% N=10). Those involved in the private sector were largely employed in Financial & Insurance Activities (17% N=21), Information and Communication (13% N=16), Professional, Scientific & Technical Activities (12% N=15), Manufacturing (11% N=14) and Wholesale and Retail Trade (10% N=13).

#### ***5.1.4.4 Employment group at entry***

The International Standard Classifications of Occupations 2008 (ISCO-08) (ILO 2012) was employed in order to classify and aggregate the occupational information obtained from institutional records. There are eight categories in this classification (Table 5.3 refers). At entry to the programme the largest single group of BA graduates were clerical support workers (26% n=52). The largest single group of BSc graduates describe themselves as technicians (31% n=22).

#### ***5.1.4.5 Social economic group at entry***

If we match the self-reported employment groups (based on job title and role) to the socio-economic groups employed by the HEA (2015a p. 43) we can estimate the socio-economic group to which graduates belonged when they commenced study (Table 5.3). The HEA currently target the non-manual, semi-skilled and unskilled worker groups for increased participation in full-time HE (HEA 2015a, p. 43). The non-manual group includes 'occupations such as clerical workers..., sales assistants and secretaries' (CSO 2012b, p. 24). The manual group includes, for example, carpenters, plasters, labourers (CSO 2012b, p. 11). The socio-economic categories are mutually exclusive; individuals are classified into one group only.

On the basis of the data provided by graduates in their application form, 31% (n=85) belonged to under-represented groups when they entered the university. This consisted of 28% in the Non-Manual category (36% BA compared to 9% of BSc graduates) and 3% in the Unskilled category. A large group (14% n=15) called themselves ‘technicians’ on their application form. I have classified this group as Lower Professional although they did not refer to themselves as professionals. Lower Professionals are not, as a group, currently targeted for increased participation in full-time HE although their estimated participation rate is not particularly high (48% compared to 119%<sup>11</sup> for the Higher Professional Group) (HEA 2015a, p. 43). A large group (34% n=90) of graduates did not provide employment details at entry. As those with low status employment are often reluctant to disclose this information we cannot assume that the missing data is evenly distributed across all groups.

Based on socio-economic grouping there is evidence that distance education is addressing under representation of targeted socio-economic groups. Under-represented students are regarded as ‘at risk’ when they enter full-time higher education and receive sustained, targeted supports. However, if this cohort enters university as part-time distance students, they receive no targeted support.

#### **5.1.4.6 Social background**

In order to get a clear picture of the socio-economic *background* of graduates, the survey asked respondents to provide the employment group, economic status and educational attainment of their parents/guardians at the time when they (the graduate) left compulsory education. It is likely parental economic status determined their progression into higher education at that stage (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). This type of data is not normally collected for adult students, who are usually classified on the basis of their own principal economic status. However, this data is useful in helping us draw an accurate account of the impact of social structures on participation in higher education for this cohort.

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<sup>11</sup> ‘...some socio-economic groups have estimated participation rates of over 100%. These are accounted for by the fact that two different data sets are being compared, and these have been gathered at different points in time and from different individuals’ (HEA 2015a, p. 43).

Forty-two per cent (n=53) of survey respondents came from a background where their father belonged to a lower socio-economic group. An additional 13% (n=16) had a father who was either retired, deceased or otherwise missing from their lives at the time they, the graduate, completed compulsory education (Table 5.4 refers). In contrast, just 26% of new entrants to full-time university came from lower socio-economic groups.

Parental education is also a significant factor when deciding to proceed to higher education (Flannery and O'Donoghue 2009). The 2011 Irish census of population tells us that young people with neither parent educated beyond primary school level are very unlikely to attend full time higher education (CSO 2012a, p. 22). We also know from the literature that HE students, whose parents have not themselves participated in HE, can struggle to persist (West et al. 2013). It is interesting therefore that the largest single group (30% N=37) of distance graduate respondents were from backgrounds in which the full time education of their father had stopped at primary level or included no formal education (Table 5.4 refers). Fifty per cent (n=62) of survey respondents' parents' highest educational qualification is low secondary level or below. Just 19% of full-time higher education students' parents fall into this category (Harmon and Foubert 2011, p. 21).

While absolute numbers in distance education are small the evidence from this case at least suggests that distance education has an important role to play in broadening participation in university education by the target socio-economic groups. The likelihood that new distance learners will be from lower socio economic backgrounds appears strong. This is important as both European and Irish policy stress the importance of higher education being reflective of the diversity of civil society (DES 2014, p. 5).

The socio-economic background of graduates is not published, in Ireland or the OECD more generally. Therefore, we cannot compare the graduates in this study to graduates of full-time programmes. Importantly, the figures for distance education reported in this case study, although small, relate to those who have successfully completed compared to the HEA data which relates to new entrants. The percentage for successful completion of full-time HE by under-represented groups may be proportionally no higher than that for distance graduates. As no official data is published in relation to the social class background of graduates, we simply do not know. What we do know is that there is a clear link between a student's non-

progression in full-time higher education and their socio-economic group, with those from lower socio-economic backgrounds less likely to graduate (HEA 2016, p. 7).

Furthermore, while we must be mindful that this is self-reported data, if we measure social class by occupation and educational attainment (Iannelli 2011) the indication is that graduates' current social class is regularly higher than their social class of origin as represented by parental occupation.

It is important to acknowledge that not all distance graduates come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Part-time flexible options are important for all groups to support life-long learning and continuous professional development.

**Table 5.3.** Employment related factors of graduates at commencement of their studies

Characteristic (*=%percentage of graduates from that programme.)	Per* cent	BA Base N(198)	Per* cent	BSc Base N (70)	Total Per cent	Total Base N (268)
<b>Principal economic status</b>						
Employee	60	118	69	48	62	166
In part-time paid employment	1	3			1	3
Self-employed	6	11	7	5	6	16
Unemployed	1	3	14	10	5	13
Leave of absence	1	2			1	2
Home duties	4	8			3	8
Retired	2	4			2	4
Missing	25	49	10	7	20	56
<b>Employment Sector</b>						
Private	40	80	61	43	46	123
Public	27	53	11	8	23	61
Charity	1	1	3	1	1	2
Missing	32	64	25	18	30	82
<b>Employment Classifications (NACE)</b>						
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	1	3		0	1	3
Mining and quarrying	1	2		0	1	2
Manufacturing	1	3	16	11	5	14
Electricity, gas, air conditioning	1	2	3	2	1	4
Construction	1	2		0	1	2
Wholesale and retail trade	6	11	3	2	5	13
Transportation and storage	2	4	6	4	3	8
Accommodation and food services	1	2	1	1	1	3
Information and communication	5	9	17	12	8	21
Financial and insurance activities	10	19	4	3	8	22
Real estate activities	1	3		0	1	3
Professional, scientific and technical	6	12	6	4	6	16
Administrative and support services		0	1	1		1
Public administration and defence	3	6	1	1	3	7
Education	15	29	4	3	12	32
Human health and social work	7	13	3	2	6	15
Arts, entertainment and recreation	5	9		0	3	9
Other service activities	2	4	4	3	3	7
Activities of households as employers		1		0		1
Missing	32	64	30	21	32	85
<b>Employment group (ISCO-08)</b>						
Managers	9	18	9	6	9	24
Professionals	8	16	11	8	9	24
Technicians	9	18	31	22	15	40
Clerical support workers	26	52	7	5	21	57
Service and sales workers	10	19	1	1	7	20
Craft and related trades workers	1	2	4	3	2	5
Plant & machine operators and assemblers	1	2	4	3	2	5
Elementary occupations		1	3	2	1	3
Missing	35	70	29	20	34	90
<b>Social economic group (estimated)</b>						
Employers and managers	9	18	9	6	9	24
Higher professional	8	16	11	8	9	24
Lower professional	9	18	31	22	15	40
Non-manual workers	36	71	9	6	28	77
Manual skilled workers	1	2	4	3	2	5
Unskilled workers	2	3	7	5	3	8
Missing	35	70	29	20	34	90
<b>All</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>268</b>

**Table 5.4.** SES and educational attainment of respondents and their parents together with socio-economic background of new entrants to full-time Irish university

Socio-economic status	Respondent (post-graduation)		Respondent's Father***		Respondents' Mother***		Full-time University New entrants* (for comparison purposes)
	%	N	%	N	%	N	
Employment Group							
Employer/manager	6%	8	12%	15	4%	5	18.8%
Professional	55%	69	24%	30	18%	23	23.8%
Non-manual	16%	19	7%	8	14%	18	9.9%
Skilled manual	3%	4	25%	31	3%	4	8.2%
Semi or unskilled manual	7%	9	10%	13	17%	21	7.8%
Farmer (200 acres or more)							7.1% (farming-general)
Farmer (less than 200 acres)			9%	12	2%	2	
Missing	13%	17	13%	17	42%	53	
Total	100%	126	100%	126	100%	126	
Principal Economic Status							
Employee	80%	101**	33%	42	17%	22	
Self-employed with paid employees	2%	2	6%	7	2%	2	
Self-employed without paid employees	2%	3	8%	10	4%	5	
Home duties	8%	10			52%	65	6.9% (own account)
Unemployed	4%	5	1%	1			
Retired	4%	5	5%	6	4%	5	
Deceased			6%	8	2%	3	
Absent from home			1%	1			
Missing data/unknown			40%	51	19%	24	17.6%
Total	100%	126	100%	126	100%	126	
Education attainment							
Primary (incl. no formal)			30%	37	24%	30	
Lower secondary			20%	25	26%	32	
Upper secondary			17%	21	24%	30	
Level 6			7%	9	9%	11	
Level 7			10%	13	5%	7	
Level 8 or higher			9%	11	6%	8	
Missing			7%	10	6%	8	
Total			100%	126	100%	126	

\*Base number =22,904, response rate = 74%. These figures are for new entrants to full-time Irish university, not graduates. Source HEA (2015b): Key Facts and Figures 2014/15, p. 21

\*\*Eighty were employed full-time and twenty-one part time. The five graduates who were self-employed were working full-time.

\*\*\*Parental economic status and education attainment at the time the graduate left compulsory education.

### 5.1.5 Accounts of habitus

Some versions of the application form asked applicants why they were applying for the distance learning degree course. One hundred and forty-one (53%) future graduates answered this question. Most responses came from BA graduates (N=106) and from men (N= 73). The Graduate Survey too asked about the reasons for choosing distance education, the institution and the course. Interviewees were also questioned about their pre-participation educative experiences. Their accounts are included below.

#### 5.1.5.1 *Always mine*

Of all Bourdieu's concepts habitus is the one which most directly allows for an internal and external dimension. According to Bourdieu (1977) social class is distinguishable not only by *external conditions of existence* but also by *internal dispositions*. The responses of many of the graduates in this DCU study indicate that their HE participation pattern related to socio-economic background and societal structures:

*I have always had an ambition to undertake 3rd level education so as to acquire further knowledge and a better understanding of the world around me. Until now that opportunity has not been available to me. (BA female M)*

*I have always wanted to improve my education level, never had a chance to catch up with lost opportunities until hopefully now (BA male M).*

Some graduates do not, or perhaps have never, envisaged full-time higher education as an option, limiting themselves to part-time offerings:

*I would not be able to commit to a conventional evening course as my work and personal circumstances would not allow me to. (BA male Y)*

Here the applicant, when asked why he is pursuing distance education, assumes part-time HE is the only alternative; because for him it is. The habitus of the graduates confines their actions to that which is feasible. They want to pursue HE but within the confines of their existing social situation.

While habitus may have predisposed the students to act in certain ways, their comments reflect an internal disposition which always had completion of a university education at its core. Many graduates used the word *always* in their response: *I always wanted to do a degree*



*course; I have always had an ambition to study for a degree; I have always wanted to finish my degree; I have always longed to get my BA. A university education had always been part of what they wanted to achieve but their social class circumstances or position caused them to delay.*

Motivation is traditionally disaggregated between ‘*intrinsic motivation*, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and *extrinsic motivation*, which refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome’ (Ryan and Deci 2000). Graduates often provided complex reasons for their participation, straddling intrinsic and extrinsic factors:

*I wish to undertake this programme to fulfil a commitment to myself to obtain my degree in history. I have previously been accepted to NUIM for a BA course. However I was unable to take up this position due to family and financial restraints [sic]. I have only recently learnt of the Oscail programme and hope that I have finally found an avenue to achieve my goal. I have a lifelong love and interest in History and look forward to hopefully teaching this as a subject in a second level environment. (BA female Y)*

What is also noteworthy in graduate accounts as they embark on their degree studies is their use of the word *my*. Graduates speak of *my goal; my dream; my studies*; but more importantly and more regularly they speak of *my degree: my BA*. This ownership of the degree from the beginning was common among those who subsequently graduated and deserves consideration. These graduates saw the degree as already belonging to them; something they simply had to find a way to *claim* or *get*:

*I have always wanted a BA from an Irish university. I have always longed to get my BA. Due to financial responsibilities and employment constraints I have been unable to. Now that these factors have changed my commitment to myself this year is to fulfil my dream so that I can better myself both personally and professionally. (BA female Y)*

Often the future graduates displayed confidence in their potential and ability to succeed:

*I feel that I have the potential to progress and further education is a necessary step towards this goal (BSc male Y)*

*I intend to become a counselling or clinical psychologist eventually. (BA female M)*

It appears evident from their accounts that the desire to develop their knowledge was longstanding; they could not recall a beginning. Their statements reveal the obstacles of

societal structures but also individual agency; not so much in overcoming obstacles but in finding a way to accommodate them.

#### **5.1.5.2 Debt aversion**

Within the qualitative comments on the application forms, graduates often appear to be concerned with securing their financial situation before embarking on higher education:

*Once my family was financially secure I knew I then could embark on this course.  
(BA female Y)*

*It has always been my objective to complete my studies to degree level and I am now at a stage in my career where I can devote the necessary time, money and commitment to achieving that objective. (BSc male Y)*

This concern with financial solvency was also evident in the accounts of the interviewees. The ten BA interviewees were all self-funded. It was apparent from their accounts that they were happy to participate only when they could fund the cost from their disposable income:

*I kept up the (part-time job) all the time I was in Oscail and that kind of funded it so I didn't think I was taking out of the family coffers which was really important to me you know with only one person earning (BA Mary M)*

*...this was during the boom now when everyone had loads of money and...we started gathering some money and it's at this point I realised I can afford this and I can do it.  
(BA Margaret M)*

*So I decided I was able to afford it and I didn't want them (employer) having any say in it (BA Peter Y)*

*Oscail was the best option for me because I was able to work full time and then pay for myself through education as well so it was the only option I had (BA Bernadette Y)*

Six of the seven BSc interviewees were funded by their employer, with the remaining BSc graduate funded by the state through a labour market activation scheme. They each indicate the importance of employer funding, outlining that without it they may not have participated, or completion would likely have taken much longer. One graduate had specifically undertaken the course in order to gain some benefit from his employer in lieu of a pay rise.

No interviewee borrowed money to complete the course. Their concern with funding from their disposable income, or being funded by their employer, indicates an aversion to going into

debt for education purposes. This echoes findings from the literature regarding debt aversion among working-class students (Butcher 2015).

### **5.1.5.3 Fragmented transitioning**

The interviews provided an opportunity to explore in more detail the pre-participation educative experiences of the graduates.

Some interviewees made subject selection decisions in second level which rendered them ineligible for university entry. Their parents had not been to third level and were ill-equipped to advise them. Advice in relation to university entry at their schools was, they said, poor:

*I didn't know that you had to have at least two honours level subjects to apply for a university course. I didn't know that....the school never told me that so I took all pass subjects (BSc Mark Y)*

Mostly however, they were inclined to see their decision at this point in their young lives as ones of individual agency:

*I didn't have a language so as it turned out I couldn't have gone to university. And I didn't really like languages so I would have struggled anyway. So I suppose I selected myself out (BSc Greg M)*

*And I kind of made a decision (he seems a little reticent to say this) I'd be better off doing pass and getting good marks rather than doing higher and getting middle of the road (BSc Brendan M)*

*University at the time, I think we looked into it and it involved money. My mother didn't work and my father was on the minimum wage so they couldn't have afforded it anyway (BSc Eddie M)*

*I realised my family couldn't afford for me to go... It just wasn't feasible...they had no money, ok? They kept saying we'll manage, we'll find a way. But can you imagine the pressure on me, like if I fail and they're after borrowing...I just didn't want that. I just knew myself that wouldn't work. Right. So I didn't do it. (BA Dominic M).*

*I wasn't able to do it (full-time HE) because I would have had to support myself the whole way through... I was really the one who was into the education and they (parents) would have pushed more for me to go to work (BA Bernadette Y).*

The largest group of interviewees (eight) went on to further or higher education, but at a level below honours degree. They regularly chose courses which were short and delivered at local institutions: a common theme in the literature on full-time working class students (Cullinan et

al. 2013; Furlong and Cartmel 2005; Greenbank and Hepworth 2008). Where possible, they chose courses which they were paid to complete, most regularly technology related courses linked to the labour market, even if they felt entirely unsuitable for them:

*I looked around for an electrical engineering degree and the Irish one was expensive but there was one in Edinburgh that was offering grants and, the course was paid for basically. But again when we worked out the cost of living expenses the family couldn't afford it so I went looking at the jobs market... there was a kind of Fas<sup>12</sup> short term course I applied for... I was midway through that course when my mother sent me up a clipping for an apprenticeship here (names current employer) (BSc Brendan Y)*

*I put down IT in the college (Carlow)... it would have been close, I would have got the bus up and down, and no accommodation costs. Carlow was the only place I had access to. I didn't really look at anything outside Carlow...if Carlow did everything, I would have done History (BA James Y)*

The graduates' parents often play a pivotal role in identifying potential employment related opportunities for their children. They were clearly looking out for openings which the graduates might avail of. In this way they mirror the behaviour of middle class parents who help position their children favourably to avail of educational opportunity. However, for the working class parents, the priority is work.

Some interviewees (Mark, Ali, Eddie, Francy and Una) were not interested in progressing to HE on completion of second level. They wanted to work, wanted to have money in their pockets, something their parents were not in a position to provide them with. Una went to work as a hotel cleaner. She recalls how the women she worked with pushed her to go back to education:

*I thought it was great ...I was getting loads of money but weirdly enough the women that I worked with in there they were nearly all from the Towers in Ballymun (working class area of Dublin) and they pushed me every day...they said 'this is not going to be your life'... and they pushed me to go back... (Una Y)*

Four interviewees, Julie, Peter, Mary and Emer tried full-time university but it had not worked out. The first three of these interviewees hail from working class backgrounds and entered university to transform their status. Emer, who hails from a middle class background, entered university to reproduce her status. Each one of them dropped out during the first year. Julie was fed up with being short of money. Peter (a non-EU citizen) was interested in the Arts but

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<sup>12</sup> Fas courses were state run courses in which participants received a stipend to participate.

ended up studying engineering in order to get a funded place. He hated the course and left primarily for that reason. Mary lacked family support and so when she was offered a well-paid job in the civil service, decided to take it:

*...my mother really thought I was mad to turn it (i.e the job) down... and I thought you know this is too hard and you know when you're getting very little encouragement at home? And I thought ah no, I'll do the other thing and I can always go back. But of course once you start earning money it's very hard to give it up. And in my house there was this idea that you could do everything part-time and to some extent you could (BA Mary M).*

Mary's mother in particular saw no reason to invest limited family financial resources in the education of her daughter, who would in any case be required to relinquish her career if she got married.<sup>13</sup> The practices of women's employment terminating on marriage likely contributed to the low HE participation rates of women up to the 1970s. This may go some way to explain their subsequent high participation in part-time HE.

Emer had gone straight to university when she finished school. Coming from a family of teachers she had always intended going to university. Originating from a small town in rural Ireland Emer explains what happened as follows:

*I always intended to go, always wanted to go. But just when I got there, literally the only way I can describe it is, I just got swallowed up. I wasn't I suppose ready for it, wasn't prepared for it... I made mistakes, I didn't stay on campus, I lived with my brother in the city and you know I made mistakes in not getting involved and I just never settled in...so I left after first year. But there was always the intention to go back; it was always unfinished for me. (BA Emer Y)*

Emer and Leo (also middle-class) are anomalies in this study as they started out with a clear advantage over the other interviewees to the extent that their families were familiar with the conventions of HE (Goldthorpe and Jackson 2008). However, for one reason or another full-time study did not work out for them. They are important anomalies and highlight the value of part-time university options for everyone.

The advice these graduates received as they approached completion of second level education did not include information on part-time higher education options. There appears to be a lack of awareness of the likely importance of part-time and life-long learning, in particular for

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<sup>13</sup> A 'marriage bar' operated officially within the public sector in Ireland until 1973. It was a practice which terminated the employment of a woman on her marriage.

working class students. How might they build on low level qualifications to achieve their goals in a manner in which they could work and study at the same time? These are issues which second level career guidance could usefully address. The state has a role to play here through the provision of a comprehensive guide to part-time study options. Institutions are unlikely to provide this as long as HE funding is focused on full-time course provision.

The majority of graduates demonstrate a working class habitus as being fundamental to their reasons for non-progression to university. Nevertheless there is a contradiction between their external and internal worlds; externally they have a low level of education and often low status employment. Inside they see themselves as capable of much more. They display a reflective and cognitive dimension (Crossley 2000) to their decision making. Many have always wanted to complete a degree; they simply have to find a way to attain it; a 'structured space' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 72), a suitable 'field'. Distance education provides that space.

### **5.1.6 Accounts of field**

#### ***5.1.6.1 Always time***

For Bourdieu HE is a field: a structured social space with its own established and accepted practices (Bourdieu 1993). Habitus is the force that directs individuals or 'actors' *in* the field (Bourdieu, in Wacquant 1989). Habitus also directs individuals *into* particular fields. When we analyse the statements the future graduates made at entry, the central role of *time* is evident.

Many graduates spent a long time trying to find a way to complete the degree - an option that would accommodate their requirements to continue to work and attend to family responsibilities, while studying. Nothing impacted their desire for learning, but in a society focused on full-time HE it simply proved difficult to actualise:

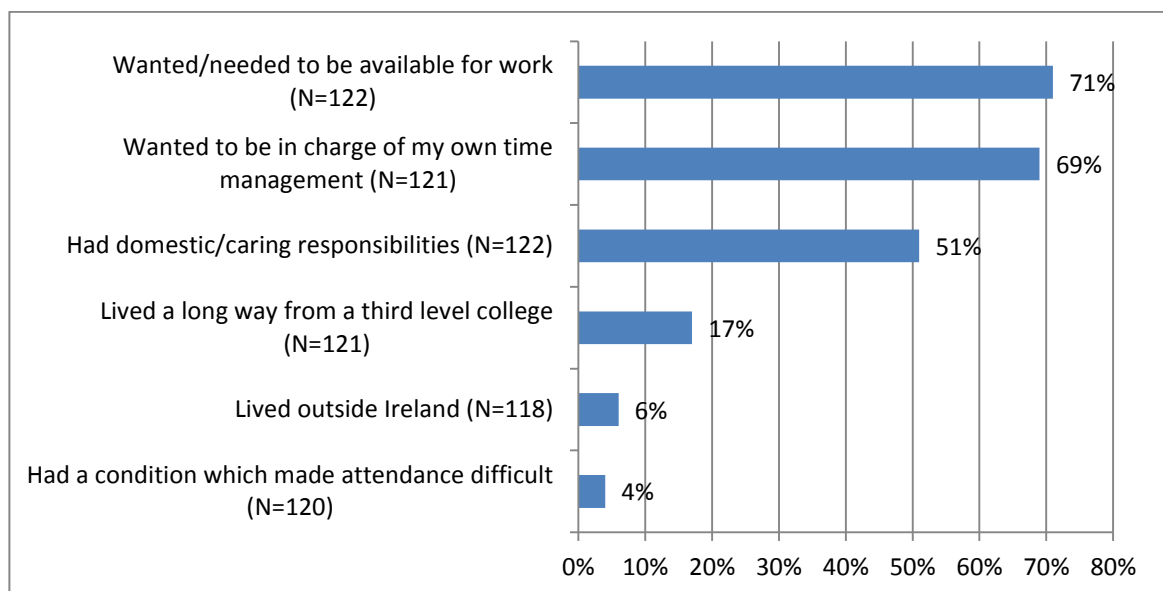
*I have searched on and off for the last 5 years to find a course....This is the first time that I have felt that a course would allow me to study within my present circumstances (BA female Y).*

*I have always wanted to complete my degree and until now I have never found an option that would work for me (BA female Y)*

No one questions why the information about the field of part-time higher education is inaccessible or invisible. This is a field these students need to access in order to enter the game. Yet they display no sense of entitlement to this information.

Time is closely associated with the field of distance education. One of the key tenets of distance learning is that it allows students to take control of their own time management, as they do not have to commit to regular attendance. The modular structure of the degrees offered in this field facilitates learning over time.

#### 5.1.6.2 *Why distance education?*



**Figure 5.6.** Percentage of graduates who reported that the given reason was very relevant or relevant when deciding to study by distance education.

In the survey, graduates were asked to rate the importance of a number of reasons in their decision to study by distance education. Figure 5.6 shows the percentage of graduates who considered the given reason very relevant or relevant to them.

The requirement to work or be available for work was the primary reason 71% of graduate respondents chose to study by distance education. Graduates are at a time in their lives when they have financial commitments; 61% of respondents had others who were financially dependent on them. More men (75%) than women (49%) had financial dependents.

Graduates are often also building their careers. It is therefore the opportunity cost of full-time study rather than the financial cost per se which rules out studying full-time. One graduate's comment sums up the views of many:

*It (i.e. distance education) was the only way I could get a third level education and still continue to support my family, giving up work to study would never have been an option for me. (BA Female M)*

Some reasons were proffered as to why distance study was preferred over part-time study.

Sometimes reasons related to distance from a third level institution.

*It was really my only option due to family commitments, distance from college and financial obligations. (BA Female M)*

*I looked at doing a degree in (Dublin college) which required attendance at college up to 3 nights per week. This was impractical, especially since I live in Dundalk. (BSc Male Y)*

Some graduates had tried evening studies but found that, together with the demands of work, this mode of delivery simply did not work for them. Others found part-time study inflexible.

Flexibility relating to attendance requirements was important to 69% of graduates:

*As part of my studies for UCD's BA Degree (Evening), I successfully completed 5 of 8 modules required to receive my degree award...Due to pressures of work, I was unable to continue with my studies at the time. (BA male Y)*

*I knew that I would not consistently attend college lectures after a full day at work. (BA Female M)*

*I looked at electrical engineering and they ran a course out in UCC. You had to take time off work, a day and a half a week I think it was. So it wasn't really part-time... and this place (employer) wouldn't give me the time off. Well they said you can have it but we wouldn't be paying you, so Jesus that's going to doubly cost me (Brendan M).*

An important outcome of the recession in Ireland is the requirement for people to be willing to move to attain employment. This requirement of the labour force to be increasingly mobile has consequences for adult participation in campus based HE provision. The flexibility provided by online distance learning accommodates this mobility:

*...flexibility. I didn't have to commit to living in one place for 4 plus years. With distance learning, if I needed to move it didn't affect my studies. (BA Female Y)*



*My job at the time involved my working in Limerick, Dublin and Cork and therefore (distance) provided the only option for me. (BA Male Y)*

While flexibility was important to those who were working, it was also important to those who had domestic/caring responsibilities. This was more common for women (62%) than men (44%).

*My son was the person with a medical condition that made it impossible for me to attend full time. (BA Female M)*

*I felt if I did that (fulltime study) it was going to completely change the tenor of the relationships at home and I didn't want to go down that route... (BA Mary M)*

One student, who had dropped out of full-time HE, explained his reasons as follows:

*After spending first year in (named University), full time college seemed a very inefficient use of time. Class time was low but spread throughout the week, limiting my ability to pursue work. (BA male Y)*

This statement highlights a further difficulty for working class students in full-time HE. Classes are often scheduled in a way that makes part-time employment difficult. This is because full-time students are not meant to work while studying. But for students with financial concerns (often working class or mature students) considerations as to whether they will be able to work while studying are important. We know from the literature that limited hours (up to 20 hours per week) of work do not impact significantly on academic attainment (Kosi et al. 2013; Ryan et al. 2011). A system, which incorporates course related term-time employment into more flexible course provision, would likely enhance the chances of recruiting and attaining more under-represented groups in university courses. This is something the new apprenticeship scheme is endeavouring to achieve and it is very welcome (QQI 2016). However, this scheme does not accommodate those who want or need to work full-time or those who are not interested in the limited range of courses on offer.

Previous studies sometimes attest to the fact that part-time students would have preferred to study full-time (Butcher 2015). There was no sense that this was the case for graduates in this study. They seemed proud of their work and the financial security it brought.

*I have completed an access course in UCD achieving 612 points studying History and Politics, however the timetable does not suit as I work full time as a project manager. (BA male M)*

*Secure in my employment but with a reduction in my hours (as the children begin school) I finally have the time and financial security to pursue a degree. (BA female Y)*

The same held true for those with caring responsibilities. Their language indicated that they wanted to perform the caring role and find a way to fit study around that, rather than study full-time and allow someone else to do the caring:

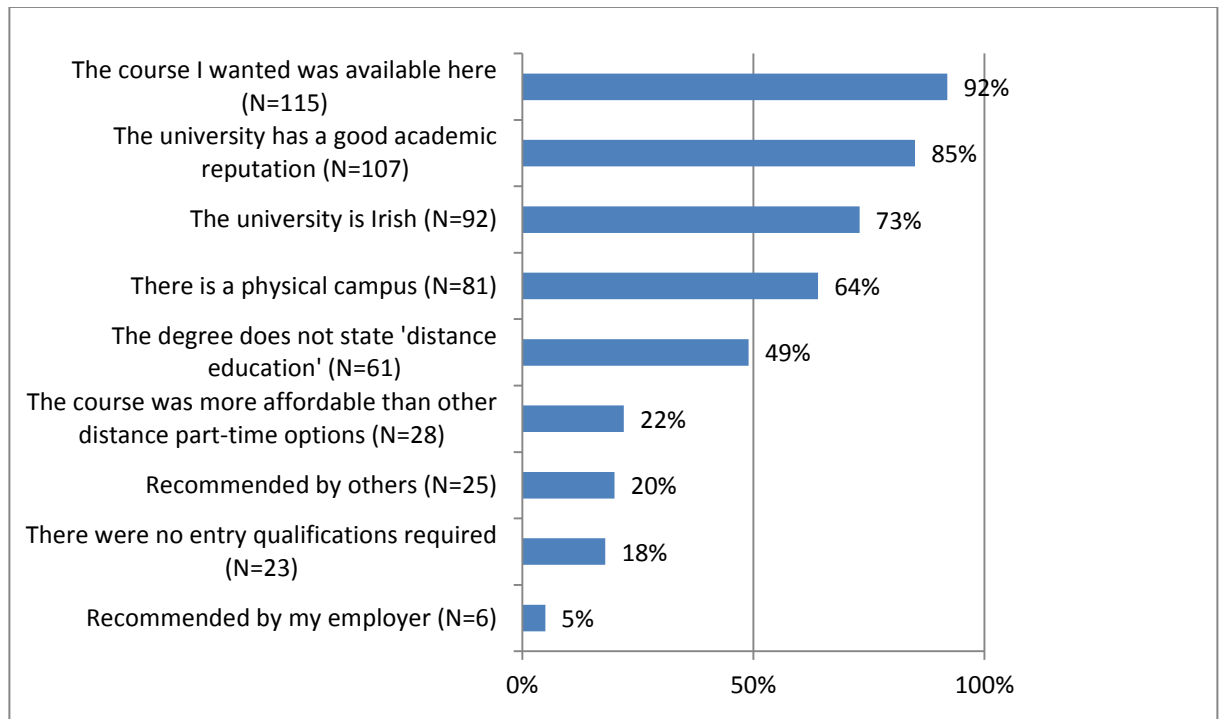
*I have a small child so cannot study by day (BA female Y)*

*I have always wanted to do a degree course and when my children are older I would like to return to work (BA female Y)*

The discourse around adult participation in full-time HE has tended to assume that adults will prefer to study full-time once associated costs, including child care, are covered. In many ways this discourse drives policy around full-time course provision. Nothing the graduates in this study said referred to a preference for full-time study. On the contrary they valued their work and the financial security it brought. They also valued their caring responsibilities and wanted study to fit in with those responsibilities, rather than eliminate them.

### 5.1.6.3 Why this institution?

Graduates were asked how important a number of reasons were in their decision to choose the institution (Figure 5.7 refers).



**Figure 5.7.** Percentage of graduates who reported that the given reason was very important or important when choosing the institution.

Graduates were primarily motivated to choose the institution because the course they wanted was available there - important to 92% of graduates. Developing and providing courses that students want to study is therefore of key importance in part-time distance education.

Graduates identified how difficult it was to find part-time/distance degrees in certain subjects, in particular Information Technology and Psychology.

The institutional reputation was of key importance to 85% of graduates. It mattered to graduates that the degree was recognised, both nationally and internationally:

*All round, it was the most practical solution for me with respect to getting a recognised degree from a good university while still being able to work and pay my mortgage.  
(BSc Male Y)*

It mattered to 73% of graduates that the institution was Irish. This was important to 76% of Irish graduates and 50% of non-Irish graduates. Some graduates, in particular those who want to work or teach in Ireland, chose subjects which are not offered in the same way in non-Irish institutions:

*I chose to study Sociology and was therefore particularly interested in looking at aspects of Irish society which would not have formed part of the course had I chosen to study with the (UK) Open University instead. (BA Female Y)*

Despite the fact that their degree was delivered by distance education and so primarily online, it mattered to 64% of graduates that there was a physical campus. This was important to 79% of those living in Dublin, 59% of those living outside Dublin and 50% of graduates living abroad.

While the graduates in this study have completed their degree through distance education, the degree parchment states DCU. The fact that it is not immediately evident to others that graduates had studied by distance education was important to 49% of graduates and may well be the reason these graduates chose DCU as opposed to a named distance education provider. This preference also came through in the interviews. Sometimes interviewees had a perception that the UK Open University (OU) would not be as well recognised as a degree from an Irish university:

*I had seen the Open University, the UK one, and to be honest, I knew if I was going to do it I wanted it to be from an Irish university and I wanted it to carry weight, I didn't see it (OU) as being something that would be recognised. (BA Bernadette Y)*

*I done it because it was governed by a university which I felt...made it legit, made it recognisable...I thought if I was going to go further (post-graduate study) DCU couldn't not recognise this. And Irish society couldn't not recognise it. Going into schools (as a teacher) with a DCU degree they can't not consider me. (BA Margaret Y)*

Some graduates ruled out the OU because of the cost involved in travelling to summer schools in the UK:

*...the ones (courses) I was looking at anyway you ended up having to travel to the UK fairly regularly to meet, attend classes and stuff, versus travelling up to Dublin. So the cost and trouble and hassle; it was more convenient to go to DCU (BSc Brendan M).*

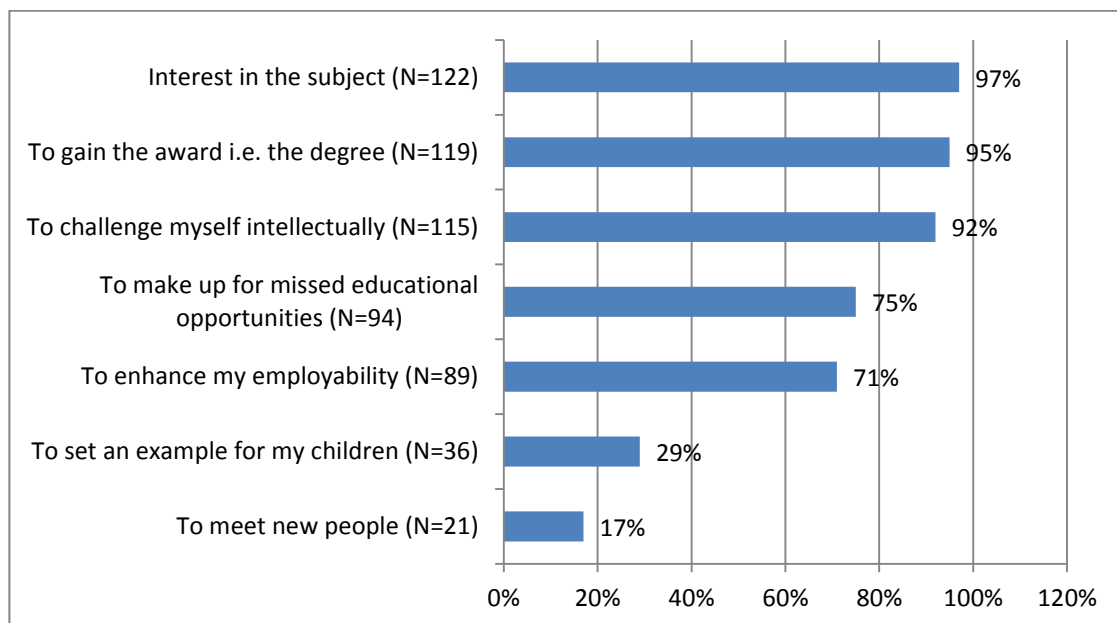
Overall just 22% of graduates said cost was an important factor in their choice of institution. Graduates appear to be less price-sensitive but more subject sensitive when selecting courses. There was no evidence that graduates had conducted a financial cost/benefit analysis (Coelli,

Tabasso and Zakirova 2012) before embarking on their distance degree. Rather, completing a degree was often something they had always wanted to achieve, and were now in a position to pursue.

### 5.1.7 Accounts of capital

#### 5.1.7.1 *Why do a degree?*

Graduates strongest motives for deciding to complete a degree were an almost perfect balance between intellectual (97%) and instrumental (95%) (Figure 5.8 refers). BA graduates more often than BSc graduates cited interest in the subjects as motivation for pursuing the course of study (29% compared to 14%).



**Figure 5.8.** Percentage of graduates who reported in the survey that the given reason was very important or important when deciding to do a degree.

However, although primarily interested in the subject, they were not tempted to pursue a lesser credential in that same topic; they wanted a degree. Because of societal structures (Smart et al. 2009) working class students can perceive that they are less bright and not suitable for university. They often lack confidence on completion of compulsory education and so target low status courses. This pattern is evident in the graduate cohort. Many had been

learning formally for many years, often in part-time courses, and appeared to be slowly building up towards completing a degree:

*I have been interested in becoming a counsellor for many years now having undertaken two art therapy courses and a counselling course... I feel I am at the right place in my life right now, financially and emotionally to undertake this course and the fact that I have continued to study since leaving school makes me confident in my academic abilities to be successful in this endeavour. (BA female Y)*

*I kept doing night classes, kept doing advanced electrical engineering and instrumentation and all that sort of thing (BSc Brendan M)*

The graduates were keen to challenge themselves intellectually (92%) and make up for missed educational opportunities (75%). They also wanted to improve their labour market prospects (71%), and saw the degree as a means of achieving this.

Often graduates had a wealth of informal learning which they sought to formalise in order to enhance their careers. Sometimes graduates were doing graduate level work, but did not have the 'piece of paper' to verify their knowledge and skills:

*While I have a depth of work experience I don't have a sheet of paper to back it up. I need to complete some college degree (BSc male Y)*

The graduates' desire to attain the award is strongly linked to the employability discourse, specifically human capital theory (Becker 1993; Schultz 1961) and the skills framework (Dearing 1997). They believe the degree will lead to enhanced employment opportunities:

*It was important to me to have a relevant degree in a technology subject to compete for suitable jobs. I had previously studied to just national certificate level. (BSc Male M)*

Gaining the degree was important to all age groups; 80% of those under 50 and 75% of those over 50 rated gaining the award of degree as very important to them.

Very few were motivated to gain their degree to set an example for their children, though women were more motivated by this factor than men (40% compared to 10%). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the distance learning mode, few graduates (17%) were motivated by the possibility of meeting new people.

Within the application forms many graduates mentioned employability related factors as their reason for pursuing a degree (57%, see table 5.5). BA graduates more regularly specified a desire to change their career (30% compared to 8% for BSc graduates). Some mentioned a desire to move into teaching (n=17), others into counselling/psychology (n=5). One of the attractions of teaching as a career for those who need to study on a part-time basis is that there is a complete pathway available through online/part-time education in Ireland for both primary (Hibernia online) and secondary (DCU part-time) teaching.

*I want to work for the Degree and then complete the H. Dip. in Arts in Primary Ed. At Hibernia College, this is my primary goal. (BA male Y)*

BSc graduates on the other hand more often mentioned wanting to develop or enhance their existing career prospects:

*I wish to gain a professional qualification relevant to my current role and increase my knowledge of IT systems & processes. (BSc male Y)*

Sometimes graduates were already in degree level positions at work, but without the 'piece of paper' to formalise their graduate level employment, they felt vulnerable:

*(My current) position involves 3<sup>rd</sup> level problem management, program management and personnel management for peers. This particular course appeals to me as being very much related to my current employment role and will benefit me in my career at XXX (BSc male Y)*

Some students had already met barriers in the workplace:

*I have no formal 3<sup>rd</sup> level education and this hinders my professional career progress (BSc male Y)*

Others indicated that without the degree they could not achieve their potential:

*I've progressed as far as possible in my career with my current qualifications. I have the potential to progress further (BSc male Y)*

Sometimes those who already held level 8 degrees at entry were returning to facilitate a change of career:

*I would like to become a secondary school teacher. My current degree does not suffice; English and Philosophy UCD 3<sup>rd</sup> class hon. (BA male Y)*

This last quote is interesting as it again indicates that, while distance education seems primarily to be used as a mechanism for working class students to attain a university education, the benefits are not restricted to this group. Those who wish to change career, or otherwise chose to participate later, may require part-time, distance education options.

**Table 5.5.** Most important reasons for returning to education cited in application forms (some graduates cited more than one reason).

Reasons for undertaking degree	BA		BSc		Total	
	%*	N	%*	N	%	N
		(105)		(36)		(141)
Educational	52	55	75	27	58	82
Career	52	55	72	26	57	81
Interest	29	30	14	5	25	35
Challenge	5	5	3	1	4	6
Total responses		105		36		141

Women more often than men expressed career as a motive (30% compared with 20%) (Figure 5.9 refers). Additionally, those involved in home duties at the start of their studies (N=8, 7 female and 1 male) were primarily motivated to participate by career related factors (Figure 5.10 refers); those who were retired (3 male, 1 female) were largely motivated by a desire to improve their education rather than solely by interest.

The interviews facilitated a more in-depth exploration of the reasons which had propelled graduates back to study. While expressing an interest in the subject matter of their studies each interviewee articulates an employment related reason which propelled them back to education (Table 5.6 refers).

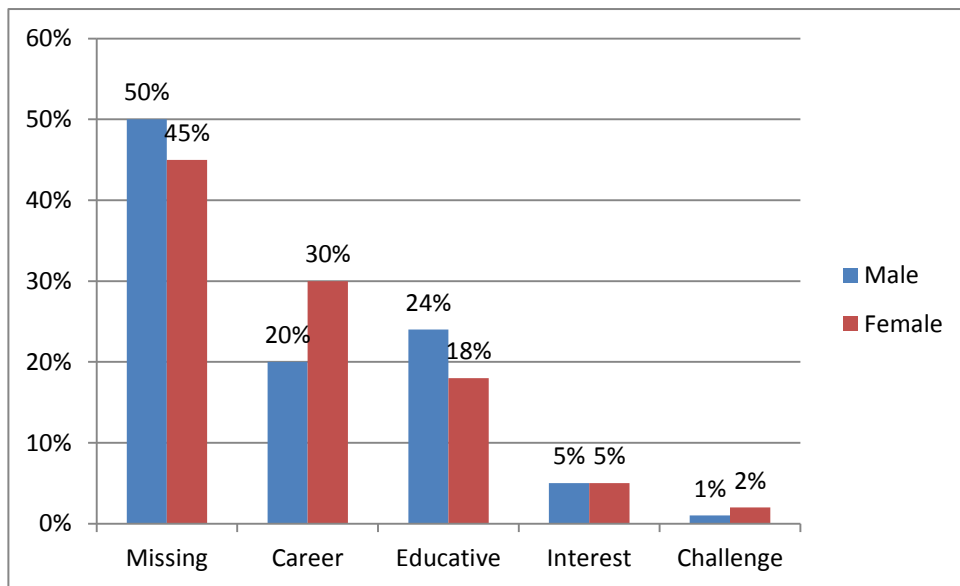
Mark outlines how, five years after he left school, he began to reflect on his employability, not in the sense of changing employment, but in the sense of progressing in his existing job. While Mark's job was secure he realised he was uncompetitive without a degree:

*I started thinking...realising at that point, education mattered.... I started to see that you needed a degree to progress. In my eyes...I wanted career progression (BSc Mark Y)*

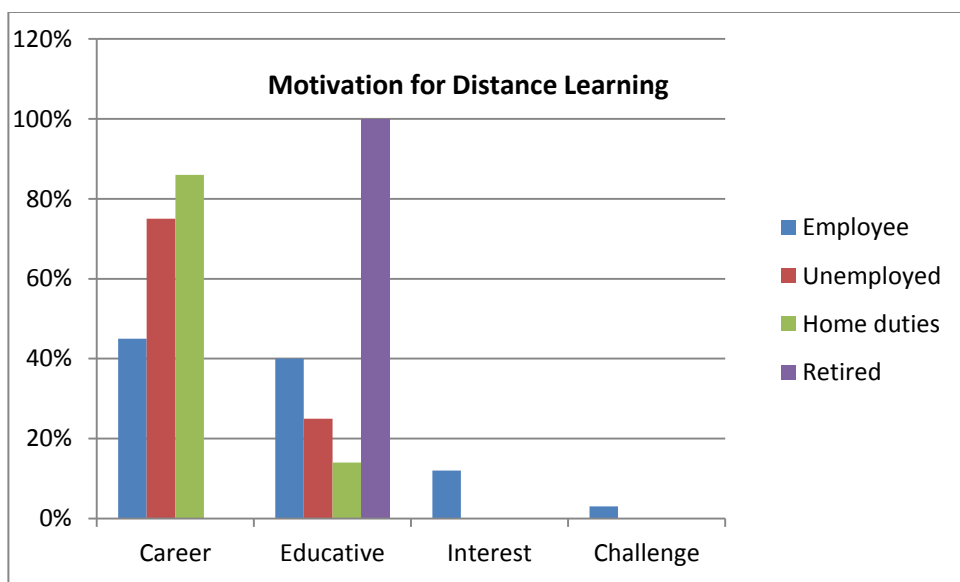
Breda had a similar experience. Working in a bank, she too found she needed a degree to progress:



*...what really happened was; yeh for different stages there are different rules so to get to my next level they introduced this thing where you had to have a degree. So that was a motivator (BA Breda M)*



**Figure 5.9.** Motivation for distance learning by gender cited in application forms (N=141)



**Figure 5.10.** Motivation for participation in distance education by socio-economic group as cited in application forms (N=140)

Ali, who at the age of forty was working as a bank official, found that her job was under threat:

*I was working in a job with a manager who I suspect was trying to point me gently towards the door which I had no intention of going there. So gradually I found bits of my job were being taken away and I said to myself (I knew I couldn't afford to leave) so what am I going to do here?*

Ali focused on changing her role within this company and was successful in so doing, because of her degree studies.

Francy's situation was somewhat similar. Having worked as an electrician in the same company for twenty years, he was constantly passed out for promotion by new-comers who held diplomas or degrees.

*..four people come in and four people step over me. So I was told 'well you can't be team leader or deputy team leader because you don't have certification at diploma level'...So...the writing is on the wall.*

Brendan too became concerned about his employment. Because of his ability he was employed in an elite company, as an engineer. However, once the recession kicked in (2008) the company began to look for redundancies and he felt vulnerable without a degree:

*So I was thinking if I do get turfed out, and I need to go looking for a job, most places if they're looking for an engineer have on the line that you need a degree. I knew the chances of me heading out into the streets after twenty odd years of (name of company) was growing, so I knew I had to get the degree. I've a load of night classes, but they count for nothing in the labour market (BSc Brendan M).*

The experience of Margaret, Dominic and Bernadette was somewhat different. They felt they were working in roles which were not entirely 'them'. They each felt they had the potential to do better and focused on changing their careers. Working as a secretary for many years, Margaret began to reflect on her position:

*At that stage I think, at about 23 (years old), I think I started...you know I sort of realized there is more in me than this. I can do better than this...it was always there.*

As a result of his ability, Eddie attained numerous promotions in work. He found that many of his peers were degree holders. He explains his feelings as follows:

*I think at that stage I probably felt I could do a bit more. I was capable of a bit more than I was doing. I didn't want to be stuck in a rut at that time. So then I had it in my head that I wanted to up my skills to the level of my new peers in ITS. So that was the driver (BSc Eddie M).*

Emer, Julie and Mary tried university but dropped out. They knew they were smart enough for university, felt they had unfinished business and understood a degree was important for career development.

*I want to be making a difference, I want to be working with people as opposed to, really what I do is sales. I think if I look back on my career and see that that would be my whole career, I'd be disappointed (BA Emer Y)*

*I really felt like I was...I suppose that I was smart enough that I could get a degree and that it would make a difference in my life if I was looking for jobs (BA Julie Y)*

Mary had a successful career in the civil service but left to raise her family. However, when her family was complete she began to think about her own future:

*...what was I going to do for the next 20 years? I had this goal of a degree. I still had that at the back of my mind. (BA Mary M)*

Una's situation was more serious. Having completed a level 6 IT course after her leaving certificate, Una went to work as a trainer. During booming economic times she worked for one government organization on a continuous basis, but always on a short-term renewable contract. When the recession hit she was told they could not renew her contract because she did not have a degree - a requirement which they had been prepared to overlook during the boom:

*I was like ah God, that's it. I don't know anything else to do. Like this is what I have always done and now I'm not going to be able to get a job without my degree. I always had the intention of going back and completing a degree. So I started back (BSc Una Y).*

Leo too was hit with redundancy and although he quickly got another job the shock had been sufficient to make him decide to return to study: something he had always intended to do.

Three graduate interviewees were motivated primarily by interest. Peter and James had a love of the Humanities which they could not ignore. Both took the opportunity of being established in their careers to return to subjects they had always been interested in.

Greg's experience was somewhat different. Although interested in learning he had never really planned to return to formal study – he already held an honours primary degree which he had completed by distance education with the University of London. However, during the recession

he was subjected to a pay cut and a concurrent increase in his working hours. He rationalized his return to education as follows:

*I couldn't get a pay increase. So I said well feck I'm going to get something out of it. I'm breaking my neck working in this place. I might as well up skill. So back I came and the job paid for the course... and I got a week off for exams. So that was worth a lot (BSc Greg M).*

**Table 5.6.** Motivation of interviewees to return to HE

Motivation	Career	Educative	Interest	Total
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	6	1	2	9
Female	8			8
<i>Programme</i>				
BA	8		2	10
BSc	6	1		7
<i>Counts</i>	14	1	2	17

### 5.1.8 Summary of pre-participation findings

This chapter profiled graduates at their point of entry to a part-time undergraduate honours degree programme through distance education, at an Irish university. This profiling illuminates many of the characteristics and aspirations of this under-examined group. One of the purposes of the research was to evidence the extent to which part-time, distance education is broadening and/or deepening access to Irish higher education to under-represented groups. Bourdieu's conceptual framework was used to explore the relationship between social class and HE access for the participants in this study.

Distance graduates are in general older than full-time on-campus students, but are as a group getting younger. More men than women completed a distance undergraduate degree. BA graduates are predominantly female while BSc graduates are predominantly male. While reflecting an international trend, this underrepresentation of women on IT programmes is

significant. Given that much of the growth in employment in Ireland is in the IT sector, introducing students to IT at second level would perhaps better position them to avail of career opportunities.

Most graduates are domiciled in Ireland and outside Dublin; 29% (n=77) live in a county with no HE provider, 37% live in a county with no university. This highlights the importance of distance education, as opposed to part-time education, in providing equality of opportunity to access university education regardless of geographic location.

It was possible to establish the employment group of the majority of graduates (68%) at commencement of their studies. The findings are important. The largest single group of graduates belong to the non-manual group at entry (28% n=77). This group is 'significantly underrepresented in higher education compared to their numbers in the wider national population' (HEA 2015a, p. 35). Overall, 31% (n=85) of graduates belonged to under-represented employment groups when they entered the university (non-manual or unskilled category) - groups currently targeted for increased participation in full-time HE. Although 35% of graduates did not belong to under-represented socio-economic groups at commencement of their studies, when we examine the socio-economic profile of their parents at the time the graduate completed compulsory education, a more nuanced story is revealed.

Based on their socio-economic background, the graduates in this study are predominantly working class. Sixty-four per cent (n=81) of survey respondents came from a background where their father had either belonged to a lower socio economic group, was retired, deceased or otherwise missing from their lives at the time they, the graduate, completed compulsory education. Fifty per cent (50% N=62) of graduates' parents (both father and mother) highest educational qualification is low secondary level or below.

With regard to the graduates themselves, a large group had never been in HE before (34%). A similarly large percentage (40%) had participated in further (25%) or higher (15%) education at a level lower than the degree they subsequently completed by distance education. This participation pattern is characteristically working class. Sixty-eight per cent of graduates completed this prior learning on a part-time basis. Most had been participating incrementally since leaving school.

The literature points out that adults tend to have delayed their participation in HE for reasons related to social class (Brine and Waller 2004; Chesters and Watson 2014; Croxford and Raafe 2014). The evidence from this DCU study reveals something additional. While some of the graduates had certainly delayed their participation, others have patterns of consistent participation in part-time higher education - slowly building confidence towards taking a degree course. Graduates felt ill advised in relation to higher education options on completion of second level education, in particular about part-time study options. Their subsequent completion of HE was protracted as they often struggled to find courses they could complete on a part-time/distance basis. Their protracted participation in HE, most regularly related to social class, often impacted on their ability to leverage academic capital from their qualifications (in the form of APL) and also economic capital, since level 8 qualifications have a higher value in the labour market.

Previous research indicates that part-time students are not homogeneous (Butcher 2015) to the extent that they vary in terms of gender, age, employment status etc. While this is true, findings from this DCU research indicate that many distance graduates share a common social class habitus. While absolute numbers in distance education are small, the evidence from this case suggests that distance education has an important role to play in broadening and deepening participation in HE by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

The majority of graduates (69% n=185) were in employment when they commenced their studies. This is hardly surprising as distance university courses are expensive. The graduates indicated an unwillingness to enter into debt to pursue their education and most regularly waited until they could fund participation from their disposable income or until they were funded by their employer or the state. Cost was not a significant factor in their decision making process. However, it may have been a factor for those who did not persist. This aspect is beyond the scope of this research.

Wanting or needing to be available for work was the key reason why graduates chose distance education. Their choice of delivery mode was constrained by work and/or caring responsibilities. In many ways the notion of choice did not exist (Butcher 2015). The opportunity cost of full-time study was simply too high. Previous studies have noted that part-time students would prefer to study full time (Butcher 2015). Graduates in this DCU study

expressed no desire to give up their jobs and associated income in order to study full-time. They were regularly in employment and this, coupled with financial/family commitments, militated against them stepping back to full-time study. Rather they sought to find a mode of study which adapted to their busy lives and existing commitments, both familial and financial. These graduates wanted to study in a part-time distance mode.

Graduates selected the HEI primarily because it offered subjects they were interested in via distance education. They were concerned about the reputational status of the institution and that their degree would be nationally and internationally recognised. The fact that the institution was Irish was important to a large number of graduates, particularly those who wanted to work in Ireland. It mattered to a large group of graduates that the mode of study, i.e. distance education, was not immediately evident to others.

Graduates wanted the degree credential. They saw the degree as key to improving their labour market and career prospects. Concerns regarding their long-term employability most regularly propelled them back to study.

The concepts of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* were also explored in this chapter. What came across quite clearly in graduate accounts was the role of social class in tailoring their educational aspirations and determining the field of HE they access.

Under-representation is a complex issue and is unlikely to be solved simply by funneling funding into full-time education. This simply ignores the social and political dimensions to under-representation such as desire for work, debt aversion, and the impact of social reproduction on HE participation.

The next section will explore the participation experience of the distance graduates in this study.

## **5.2 The participation phase**

The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) gathers data on the views of first and final year students of full and part-time programmes regarding the quality of their HE experience. ISSE questions cover many topics including: academic challenge, active learning, student-staff interactions, work integrated learning, higher order thinking and career readiness. It was therefore decided to minimise collection of data on these topics and focus instead on the overall supports and obstacles distance graduates experienced as they progressed through their studies.

### **5.2.1 Duration of study**

Eight years is the maximum designated time frame for degree completion at DCU for all students; full and part-time are treated the same in this regard. The majority of graduates completed their degree within a six year time frame (54% n=145; Table 5.7 refers). Completion in less than three years was possible where exemptions, based on prior certified learning, were awarded. The mean time frame for completion was 6.8 years (median 6). Where students took a longer time frame to complete, this can relate to a number of factors:

- In the case of BA graduates there were some legacy issues which permitted some of them an undesignated time frame for degree completion
- A number of students exited with a diploma and returned some years later to complete a degree. These 'boomerang' students were exclusively BSc (N=15) graduates. This contributed to the fact that twice as many BSc as BA graduates (28% compared to 14%) took more than eight years to complete their degree.

As students take varying lengths of time to complete their degrees, graduate figures are not compared to registration figures in any specific year in this study.

### **5.2.2 Classification of award**

The largest group of graduates received a H2.1 classification in their final award (54% N=143) (Table 5.7 refers). BSc graduates more regularly obtained a first class honours classification than BA graduates (46% compared with 22%). This may relate to the fact that more BSc graduates entered the course with pre-existing HE qualifications. The higher the level of prior education the more likely the graduate was to receive a first class honours classification with



those entering with a level 9 award 2.5 times more likely to receive a H1 than those entering with lower second level education (Appendix G refers). As more males than females completed a BSc degree, this impacted on the gender allocation of awards, with almost twice as many males attaining a first-class honour (37% compared with 19%). While we must be mindful that we are looking at a survivor sample, it is nevertheless interesting to note that people with varying levels of education at entry, go on to successfully complete and attain a first class honours classification (Appendix G).

**Table 5.7.** Academic profile of graduate population

Characteristic	BA		BSc		Total	Total
	Per cent	Base N 198	Per cent	Base N 70	Per cent	Base N 268
<b>Duration of study</b>						
2 years			1	1		1
3 years	5	9	7	5	5	14
4 years	15	29	12	8	14	37
5 years	17	34	9	6	15	40
6 years	20	39	20	14	20	53
7 years	19	37	22	15	19	52
8 years	11	22	1	1	9	23
9 years or more	13	28	28	20	18	48
<b>Classification of award</b>						
H1	22	44	46	32	28	76
H2.1	60	118	36	25	54	143
H2.2	18	35	14	10	17	45
H3		1	4	3	1	4
Total		198		70	100	268

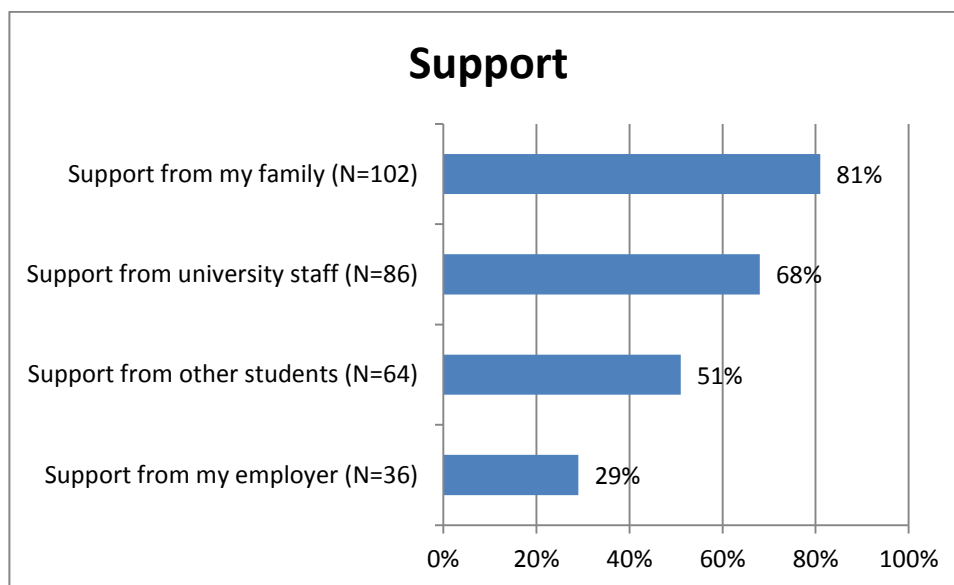
### 5.2.3 Fee payment

The survey asked graduates about the principal fee payer for the course. The majority (70% n=89) of graduates paid their own fees. This was more often the case for BA rather than BSc graduates (85% compared to 39%). The cost of part-time study can make it inaccessible to those who do not have a large disposable income. Twenty-one per cent (n=26) of graduates were funded by their employers. This was more often the case for BSc graduates (47% as opposed to 9% for BA).

We know from institutional records that just under 2% (n=5) of graduates were fully funded by the state (two BA and three BSc) while 4% (n=11) of BSc graduates had been partly funded in this manner. Irish state financial support for BSc programmes takes the form of Labour Market Activation Funding rather than funding to support access per se. One BA graduate was funded by another European state.

#### 5.2.4 Support factors

Graduates were asked in the survey about the factors that supported their successful completion.



**Figure 5.11.** Percentage of graduates who reported that the indicated sources of support were either very important or important in helping them to successfully complete the degree.

Families were by far the most important supporters of the graduates during their studies, important to 81% (n=102) of graduate respondents. Given that disposable income and family time is eaten into by course participation, it is reasonable that many would find it difficult to complete without family support:

*In the final year I struggled with balancing study time with family commitments, my husband was the one who encouraged me not to give up (BA female M)*

Support from the university staff was also of key importance to graduates. Most often this was related to the support of the tutor:

*The excellence of some tutors also contributed to a great experience. (BA Female M)*

*Don't underestimate the role of the tutor in fostering student engagement. (BA Female M)*

Having a support network of other students was important to a majority of graduates. Graduates valued the social aspects of the course: meeting other students at tutorials and collaborating with others online. Although they had not signed up in order to make friends, friendship was often an outcome:

*The whole learning experience was great and I made some lasting friendships. (BA Female O)*

*We agreed...and when I mean we I mean myself and the guys who were doing it together...we got our little clique...our little study group...we did two modules a year, because we had work, we had family life. We made a commitment (to each other) we were never going to repeat. (BSc Leo M)*

*And then you start talking about 'have you seen?', 'what do you think?', 'did you have problems with?'...you give the same assignment to ten people and they'll all take a different angle on it cause they're all coming from different backgrounds. They come up with things you haven't thought of (BSc Brendan M).*

*Once you develop contacts on the same modules it becomes easier to collaborate over email and at tutorials. (BSc Male Y)*

One graduate pointed out that because you have so little time to socialise with your friends and family, socialisation within the course takes on an added significance. There are other benefits of 'within course' socialisation. One graduate puts it well:

*...making friends and being part of a study group was both enjoyable and very productive to my studies – it enabled you to gauge the effort required and have a sounding board for ideas and issues (BSc Male M)*

Graduates articulated that meeting with other students and tutors was very important to them and while they were happy with distance education, they would not have signed up for a completely online course:

*I would not have signed up to a wholly online course. (BA Female M)*

*Distance would have to include face to face class time. Not online only. (BA Female M)*

*The tutorials where one had the opportunity of meeting others were invaluable. (BSc Female M)*

However, graduates were also keen to point out that their own individual resilience was important in their persistence:

*I think you do have to have a very strong personal work ethic and motivation to succeed. (BA Female M)*

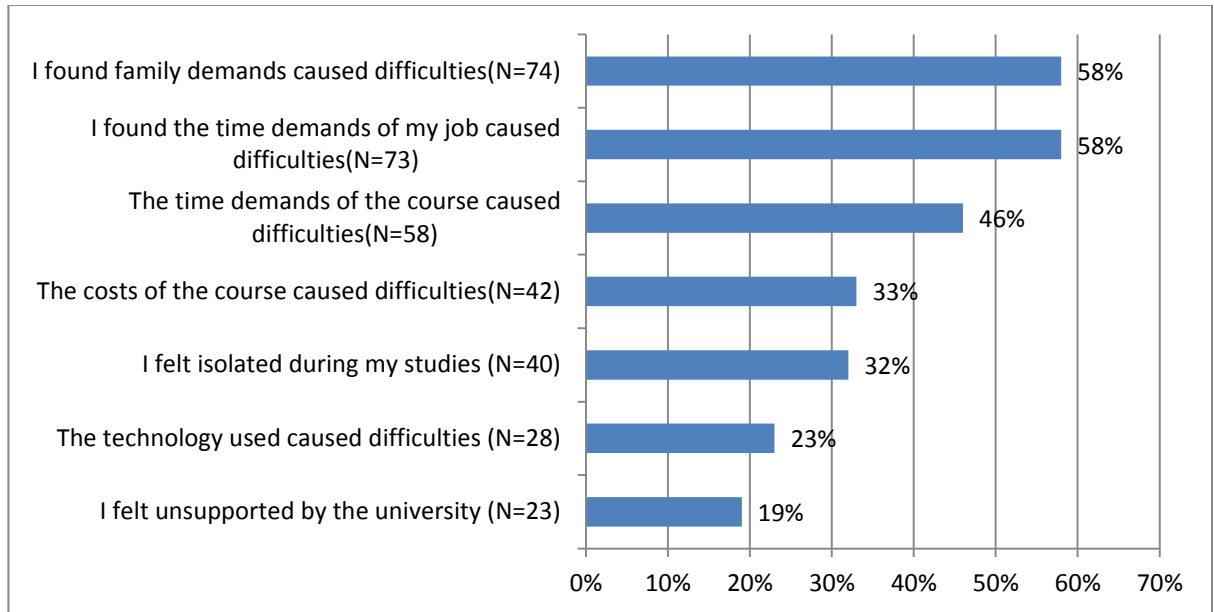
*If I start something I finish it – even if I got the ebola virus I would have completed the degree (BA Male M)*

*To have a third level qualification for me provided me with confirmation of my ability. Sometimes workload was an issue with work and family commitments, but overall I wanted it badly enough to keep going. (BA Female M)*

Employer support was not deemed significant to most graduates with only 29% ranking it as important.

### 5.2.5 Obstacles to successful completion

Graduates were asked about the obstacles they faced during the course of their studies. Figure 5.12 indicates the factors that were rated as relevant or very relevant to graduates' successful completion of their degree.



**Figure 5.12.** Percentage of graduates who reported that the indicated obstacles were very relevant or relevant to them during the course of their studies.

#### 5.2.5.1 Time

The most significant factors, mentioned consistently by almost half of graduate survey respondents, related either directly or indirectly, to conflicting demands on their time. Work and family commitments were the main reasons for the time pressure, closely followed by the time demands of the course. The time demands of the course were more relevant to those in full-time employment (46%) than those involved in home duties (31%) or employed part-time (29%). Family demands were felt equally strongly by men and women (24% and 26% respectively). A small number of graduates confided that their partners had been particularly unsupportive; this was equally true for men and women. Two interviewees (12%), both women, associated their marriage break-up directly to their participation in the programme. One related it directly to the time demands of the course:

*I think my husband started off thinking it was a great idea but because it took so much time, the reality was different and as time went on...sometimes I wonder did the stresses of kind of doing the degree, at the time, all the hours you have to put into it, I ended up with a marriage break up. Looking back I do think, Jesus, it probably was too much really (BA Breda M).*

The second graduate thought the relationship problems had more to do with her husband's feelings of inferiority when she started to study for a degree:

*My husband at the time was somewhat supportive but also somewhat not supportive. I can't really speculate too much about his motivations but I think he was sort of afraid maybe that it would change me...or that he would lose me or something because of me kind of bettering myself (BA Julie Y)*

Julie entered distance education to transform her situation. Originating from a working class background she wanted to attain the degree in order to improve her life chances. The literature identifies how transformation often has a high cost (Lynch 1994; hooks 2002; Reay 2004); leaving individuals with a sense that they exist in a liminal state, no longer part of their social class or origin but not fully belonging to any other class either. Bourdieu (1999, p. 511) identifies the experience as 'a habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences...' This pressure on personal relationships has been noted in the literature for mature graduates of full-time programmes (Redmond 2006).

The majority of graduates were of an age when work and family demands are at their peak. While these graduates were resilient enough to persist, work and family demands cause many students to withdraw from distance education (Kember 1995; Simpson 2002; Tinto 1993; Woodley 2004). A policy which supports earlier participation in part-time/distance learning may better support persistence.

Another aspect of 'time', which presented an obstacle for graduates, was the struggle they faced with sustaining their own motivation when they found the course was taking longer to complete than they had anticipated. Students, perhaps because they were participating later in life, often put themselves under enormous pressure to complete the degree in as short a time frame as possible, as if they should somehow 'catch-up' with those who already held degree qualifications. If something arises in their personal life, either positive (marriage, children) or negative (illness) it can disrupt their schedule. Preparing students for this is a necessary part of student support.

*After finishing 9 modules I was tempted to exit with a diploma in Arts. Time constraints due to more domestic responsibilities (arrival of children) with progression of time. Financial constraints as well. The possibility of gaining a qualification to enable postgraduate studies in Psychology motivated me to do four more modules to gain the BA. (BA Male Y)*

*I was tempted to leave my studies due to the length of time (BA Female M)*

#### **5.2.5.2 Isolation**

While a minority of graduate survey respondents (32%) indicated that isolation was an obstacle to their participation, it featured strongly as a theme in the qualitative comments submitted with the survey, with twenty comments specifically relating to this topic. Comments were not simply about being separated from each other and from their tutor; graduates expected that. Rather they indicated a concern with the dearth of opportunity for interaction with other students within the structure of the course itself:

- *The relative absence of discourse opportunity (BA Male O)*
- *The least enjoyable part was the feeling of being alone with assignments – by that I mean, the absence of peer support was disadvantageous. (BA Female O)*
- *I did find the distance learning approach was quite isolating. I would have preferred more discussion around the subject and topics I was studying. (BA Female M)*
- *At times especially in the earlier years you can become isolated. (BSc Male Y)*

The isolation they felt as students sometimes extended to their experience as graduates to the extent that often they knew no one who was graduating at the same time as themselves. This caused some graduates to skip the graduation ceremony:

*I didn't attend my conferral partly because there was a good chance that I might not know any of the students there on the day (BA Female M)*

*The only disappointing aspect was that when I graduated last year I did not know anybody graduating on that day. This is inevitable, as through the years people study different modules and complete the course on different timescales. (BA Female O)*

This is a particular problem related to the modular nature of distance education. Because students have a degree of flexibility in the modules they select to study each year, they regularly do not go through the degree programme with the same cohort. This problem was also identified by interviewees:

*Obviously you met people at classes and stuff but...I was jumping around from subject to subject (James Y)*

*One of the things I haven't got out of this is a network. (Greg M).*

While the issue of isolation is something distance education staff are critically aware of, and one which needs to be tempered with the requirement for flexibility, clearly there is a need to do more to address the issue of isolation and network building for off-campus students.

### **5.2.5.3 Institutional habitus**

...In order for a field to function, there have to be stakes and people prepared to play the game, endowed with the *habitus* that implies knowledge and recognition of the immanent laws of the field, the stakes and so on (Bourdieu 1993, p. 72)

Within any field there are customs and practices which confer legitimacy on the field and on those operating within it. Within HE there are rules and regulations which students must assimilate in order to succeed. DCU is primarily a campus-based university, set up and state funded to support full-time, on campus students. In the main the student body consists of well-resourced school leavers whom the university is in a position to select. There is little incentive therefore for institutions to critically evaluate or change their practices, to accommodate part-time, unfunded, distance students. However, both full-time and part-time students make a similar personal contribution to the cost of their education. Distance graduates sometimes experienced a sense of being less important than full-time students:

*The administration of the programme often felt poor, as if we weren't given as much consideration as full-time students. (BA Female Y)*

*I felt very unsupported by DCU as a distance student - having since went on to study full-time at another university for an MSc, I was amazed at the difference .... (BA Female M)*

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

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

*I never felt part of the university...more needs to be done to try to integrate distance students (BSc Francy M)*



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

*I don't feel that connection you're talking about with the university (BSc Greg M).*

*You see the halls and you see all the posters and societies and all that but you know you're never going to join any of those (laughs) so there's no real connection to the university (BSc Brendan M)*

Reay (2001, p. 339) portrays the experience of working-class mature students as 'being looked down on, of being positioned as a supplicant...'. The distance graduates often feel excluded from institutional supports, observing that such supports seemed to be focused on full-time students. This is perhaps an inevitable result of the fact that part-time students are not eligible for student supports. In effect this means that part-time students have limited awareness of these supports as is evidenced by the fact that just 6% (n=8) of survey respondents made contact with the careers service:

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

*I have just been accepted in a Masters' programme... It is an area I became interested in through my Psychology study. I definitely need career guidance to see where all this study will bring me. I am feeling my way in the dark most of the time. (Female O)*

The university does not receive funding to support part-time students. Therefore, the external face of the 'field'; for example the website, does not invite part-time students into the game<sup>14</sup>. If approached on an individual basis, the university community are supportive of these students. However, the students and staff sometimes feel unsure about the students' entitlement to use support services.

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

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<sup>14</sup> 'We can indeed, with caution, compare a field to a game (jeu) although, unlike the latter, a field is not the product of a deliberate act of creation, and it follows rules or, better, regularities, that are not explicit and codified' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 98)

discourse also currently exists around the similarity between full-time and part-time students since most full-time students also have a job. However, there are critical differences.

For part-time students, their job is normally their primary concern. They are older, are often on a career path and/or hold positions of responsibility. Additionally, they often have serious financial commitments such as a mortgage or others who are financially dependent on them. If they are required to work extra hours they must do that. Neither can they give up their job when study demands it.

For full-time students, study is generally accepted as their primary concern. However, they often also have part-time jobs. Research indicates that full-time students spend on average 17 hours per week (ILCU 2016) in a part-time job. However, they are more regularly in a position to give up jobs to attend to study commitments at critical times of the academic year. They can do this because they are normally supported financially by others, most regularly parents or guardians (ILCU 2016). Undoubtedly there are full-time students who work far less. There are also those who work far more than 17 hours per week, often out of financial necessity. Such students may well be better off with a part-time study option but the current funding mechanism is funnelling them into full-time study.

While distance graduates can limit their study workload to accommodate their employment they do not have the option to refuse to work extra hours when their employment requires. Neither can they walk away from employment when study requires. They are more regularly providers of financial support rather than takers. Furthermore, they do not gain any academic credits for course related employment, something which many full time students benefit from. These differences must frame any discussion on the blurring of lines between part-time and full-time study.

Notions of flexibility can appear 'empty of content' (Barnett 2014, p. 7) when distance graduates must conform to regulations devised to deal with the predominantly full-time student population. The regulation which came in for most criticism related to assessment. Within the university students must successfully complete all academic components of a module within one academic year (DCU Marks & Standards 7.1.6., p.11). Modules which are not successfully completed in one academic year must be retaken. Marks for elements which have been completed cannot be carried forward. Additionally, such modules must be paid for

again, in the following academic year. This can cause difficulty for students who complete some, but not all, course work in the designated time frame:

*I suffered from an illness two years ago and I did not get credit for the work that I had already done. I found little support from DCU when I had this problem. (BA male M)*

*I was lucky not to fall ill during it because if you do fall ill you fall behind quickly. I remember someone fell ill and fell behind and just couldn't catch up and twas only in the last few months of the degree. And they couldn't do the last project and they just gave up (laughs, though he clearly does not find this funny). They just gave up. I just said thank God it wasn't me, to go through all that and then just give up (BSc Brendan M)*

Graduates complained about regulations that make no apparent sense:

*I wanted to do the two of them (two modules) in the same year and they said; 'no you can't'. At which point I almost went (left). But when you do them (the modules) they're not connected (BSc Greg M).*

Some graduates had issue with regulations pertaining to the classification of the award, specifically in relation to the mark used to determine the classification. This is based on the first attempt at the relevant, approved modules. Where this original precision mark is less than 40%, and the student subsequently successfully completes the requisite credits, the student will be awarded a Third Class Honours degree irrespective of the final marks achieved (DCU Marks and Standards 8.1.1., p. 13). This regulation is also applied to students who register for a module but make no attempt at it. One graduate who fell foul of this regulation states the following:

*I found there was a lack of communication regarding the repercussions in choosing subjects each year. I chose subjects over the last couple of years which I had previously registered for & did not continue with. I was only advised post exam/results that my second attempt could never count towards my final degree mark. This meant that instead of averaging a 2:1 mark, which I achieved on second attempt, I averaged a 3rd class honours pass. Not being on campus & having access to staff advisers meant that I did not realise this until it was too late. (BA Emer Y)*

Clearly this graduate finds herself in a very difficult situation. She has a third class honours degree instead of the second class level 1 she was expecting. The graduate outlined how she had been debarred from Masters' courses because of this low classification. She is keen to point out that she accepts it was her responsibility to inform herself of this regulation. She is also keen to point out that the academics involved were very supportive.

Interestingly, this graduate came from a middle class background; both her parents were teachers. One therefore assumes she entered university with cultural and economic capital. Yet she copes less well in the field of distance education than her more working class peers. Emer had previously attempted full-time university study but dropped out at the end of first year. She blamed her withdrawal on her lack of involvement in university activities. Yet she repeated this pattern when she became a distance student and did not attend tutorials or join a study group (largely optional activities, though strongly encouraged by the institution).

*I didn't participate in the...(interviewee struggles to remember the word 'tutorial' and I prompt her)..yeh tutorials and that is a huge regret of mine, huge regret. It was something I really only got into in the final year when I knew I had to...*

Fortunately Emer is the only one of the 268 graduates to have had this experience with the classification of her award. Yet many other graduates felt removed from institutional supports. University rules and regulations are often impenetrable, written in university specific language which is unfamiliar to students, in particular working-class students. Regulations which might seriously impact on student outcomes need to be presented, in everyday language, early and often to students. Unfortunately, personalised student support is costly to provide.

Finally, while most comment in relation to tutors was positive, there was some negative feedback. Although face-to-face tutorials are generally optional, sometimes tutors, who normally worked with full-time students, regarded tutorials as compulsory and demonised students who did not attend. This could be problematic:

*I couldn't really financially afford to go (to face to face tutorials)...I don't think that was always understood (by tutors) maybe...if I'd to drive from say (location), including petrol and childminders, and all that stuff it could be €60 or €70. And I was already paying the fees for the course so it wasn't really feasible to travel to Dublin on a regular basis for the tutorials (BA Julie Y).*

This comment highlights the importance, particularly in part-time/distance education, of engaging tutors who understand the student cohort. All other things being equal, perhaps tutors who have themselves been non-traditional students, are worthy of strong consideration when employing teaching staff. They could in certain instances act as role models for non-traditional students.

#### **5.2.5.4 State systems**

The volatility of part-time HE provision impacts on the security graduates felt in being able to complete their courses. A number of graduates had already experienced part-time degree programmes, they were participating in, being phased out. They were concerned the same would happen in DCU:

*Least enjoyable was when (withdrawal of funding for Oscail) put the future availability of modules in doubt, but delighted to see the setup improve as I went on. (BA male M)*

This lack of surety regarding course provision, even for courses they are actually registered on, is indicative of the vulnerability of part-time students in the field of HE. Others, on labour market activation schemes, whose funding ceased once they obtained employment, struggled to continue with the course:

*Nearly had to leave due to a cease in state funding. Almost led to dropping out from the course but for a late reprieve with loans from the Credit Union. (BSc Male M)*

*After LMAS funds ran out part way through, it was very difficult to fund studies, as well as clear debts from unemployment (BSc Male M)*

#### **5.2.5.5 Technology**

Graduates were in general positive about the impact technology had on the course:

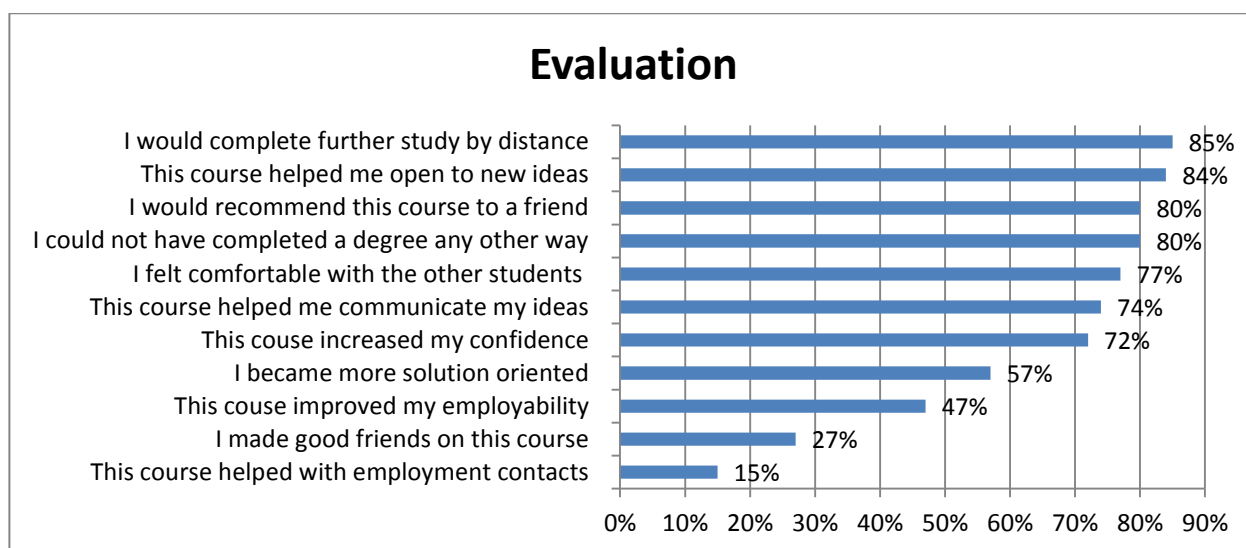
*...in the early noughties broadband took off, so no longer did you have your dial up modems and your 56k modems or your slow internet. Proper always on broadband, invaluable. And that was really a positive (BSc Leo M).*

*Moodle and all that, that made it very handy (BSc Eddie M)*

A small number of graduate survey respondents spoke about problems with technology but this tended to relate to the poor quality of broadband in the area in which they lived. While this did not manifest as a major issue in this study, it is certainly something policy makers must be mindful of given the focus on building digital capacity in HE (National Forum 2014).

### 5.2.6 Programme evaluation

Graduates were asked about their level of agreement regarding a number of programme evaluation statements (Figure 5.13. refers).



**Figure 5.13.** Percentage of respondents who strongly agree or agree with the given statements regarding course evaluation

The majority of graduate survey respondents were overwhelmingly positive about their course, in particular stating that they would have no hesitation in completing further study by distance education (85%) or in recommending the course to a friend (80%) (Figure 5.13 refers). Graduates indicated a belief in the equivalence of distance education with full-time, on campus study:

*From speaking to fellow students who have studied both distance education and full time I think online distance education is just as good if not tougher and more involved than full time education as there is a lot more responsibility on you as an individual to get the work done. (BA Female Y)*

Most significantly, 80% (n=98) of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that given their circumstances, they could not have completed a degree any other way.

*If it wasn't for (distance education) I would never have been able to do a degree. (BA Male Y)*

A small number of graduates indicated an awareness of structural inequalities and how, once given the opportunity they were in a position to fulfill their potential:

*Made me aware that given the opportunity, adult learners could achieve so much and leaving cert results do not determine 'potential' (BA Female M)*

*It's given me confidence in the fact that Yes I am not stupid! I achieved a degree something that I never was expected to do while I was at school. It makes me proud of myself. It was worth the pain, stress and the time it took from my family life. (BA Female M)*

The majority of graduates felt they had benefited from the course. They agreed that they had become more open to new ideas (84%), better able to communicate their ideas effectively (74%) and more confident (72%). These factors are important in relation to both employability and personal transformation.

Seventy-seven per cent of graduate respondents articulate that they felt comfortable with the other students on this course. This is an important finding. Non-traditional students in full-time university regularly articulate feeling like 'fish out of water'<sup>15</sup> (Keane 2011; Redmond 2006). They often fail to integrate successfully, and regularly do not persist (HEA 2016). While there are many valid reasons proposed for this such as lack of cultural capital (Reay 2013), and demands of part-time jobs (Redmond 2006) it is also likely that their lack of critical mass within the full-time university system may impact on their ability to persist. Distance education appears to be providing students with a sense of finding a space, with others like themselves, where they can feel comfortable. They have managed to find 'an activity that is entirely 'them' and with it, kindred spirits' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 223). One graduate who had gone on to do a full-time Masters explained her experience there:

*It was a full-time masters' so it was my first experience of full-time and there were three mature students; women. One of them dropped out at Christmas. But I found...well I was glad there was somebody else of my vintage in that class because while they were all nice young people, they were all nice young people and I just hadn't got the same interests. I did feel far more out of it then I ever did in Oscail (BA female M)*

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<sup>15</sup> This analogy was first introduced by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 127) '...when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted'.

This sense of belonging also came through in the interviews:

*Now when I started there were a lot of people like me, a lot of mummies. I found people sufficiently like myself to make it comfortable you know... I would have to say that I found most people were from similar socio-economic backgrounds as myself...that they would have had parents who hadn't gone to college (BA Mary M).*

At the same time graduates do not relate this to making good friends on the course, a statement supported by just 27% of respondents. While it is important to feel comfortable with others on the course this does not necessarily mean that long-term friendships are established. Neither does it guarantee persistence.

Seventy-one per cent (n=89) of graduate survey respondents specified that they had undertaken the degree to enhance their employability (Figure 5.8 refers), ostensibly to move into a graduate job. Graduate employment is determined by the extent to which graduates 'are required to use the knowledge and skills they had developed as undergraduates' (Elias and Purcell 2013, p. 14). Forty-seven per cent (N=58) of graduate survey respondents think that the degree *actually* improved their employability (Figure 5.13). This gap may relate to a number of factors. While a primary degree may be a necessary condition of graduate employment, it is not always 'enough' (Tomlinson 2008). Many graduate positions require further, post-graduate study. Employability too is susceptible to economic conditions and these graduates have graduated during a period of severe economic recession in Ireland.

Sometimes those who commenced the degree without any intention of using it to develop a career (most regularly BA graduates) began to see career development as an option as they progressed through their studies:

*...in my final year, I actually began to think my God maybe I could actually do something with this... originally it was just box ticking and now I think maybe I could (use it) (BA Bernadette Y)*

*...at the start I just saw it as just being in third level education was my first goal, just to try and make it through and achieve that. But once I was coming to the end of it and I was going to achieve it then I kind of became more focused about what I might want afterwards (BA Mary M)*



Graduates did not think that the course helped them make employment related contacts. This is a real shame as, within distance education, students who are unemployed or looking for work are in direct contact with those in employment - often those in senior positions within firms. This drives home the necessity of building collaboration opportunities into course delivery. Providers must endeavor to ensure that collaborative opportunities are in fact 'noticed' and taken up by students (Hammond, 2016).

Sometimes graduates were given employment related opportunities which they did not recognize. During her first year on the degree programme interviewee Una (BSc Y), and another female student, both got an opportunity to work with an IT company on a 'return to technology' programme. Both women commenced the programme as part of a government labour market activation scheme. While they both accepted the job placement, Una was critical of it:

*...it was only a pilot programme so nobody really knew what they were doing and I went in there and I was sitting there every day going: What am I supposed to be doing today? ...so for three weeks of me sitting there...with nothing to do and I was like 'I can't do this, I actually need to break away from it...' So I left the programme (BSc Una Y)*

This was an opportunity which Una did not fully recognise until her degree was completed. She came to understand at that later stage that the company had been working with the government to try and increase the number of women working in technology. This presented her with an opportunity to get her foot on the ladder in a major IT company. Her colleague gave up the course and took the work placement, which later turned into a permanent job. Una gave up the job and continued with the course. In fact, with a little planning, they could each have retained both the course and the job.

As many of the graduates were in employment when they commenced studying, they are not always on the look-out for career related opportunities. Eddie (BSc M) relates the following:

*I remember there was one guy who was working with XX actually and he kinda said you know if anyone wants to, they could apply if they wanted to. He was in a management position, something like that. But like it wasn't...at the time I didn't consider it.*

The distance graduates in this study availed of social networks, both within and outside the university, to support their persistence. They did this through 'bonding' capital, accruing from

their immediate social circle, but also through 'linking' capital, as they often secured employer funding to support their participation (Feinstein et al. 2008). The graduates appear less successful in accessing or recognising potentially valuable social links which might form a bridge to future social capital and associated opportunities, for example with the Careers Service or with other students. The nature of their part-time distance experience has done little to highlight to students the importance of them developing social capital for themselves, or indeed recognising the capital value of what they already possess, and how they might leverage that to enhance their bridging and linking social capital.

### **5.2.7 Summary of findings from the participation phase**

Most graduates completed their degree within a six year time frame and most attained a 2.1 classification. The majority of graduates paid their own fees, although employers are significant financial supporters of BSc graduates.

Graduates relied heavily on family support in order to successfully complete their studies and this, coupled with support from university staff and other students were their primary sources of abutment. Graduates liked the physical contact with staff and other students while valuing the flexibility of distance education. However, they were keen to point out that they would not have signed up for a fully online course.

The greatest obstacle to successful completion was the time demands of family and employment. Their participation took place at a time in their lives when work and family demands are at their peak. Two interviewees (12%) attribute marital breakdown directly to their participation in the course.

Graduates also identified systems and structures as obstacles to their success. Isolation was frequently mentioned as problematic. Graduates indicated a concern with the dearth of opportunity for interaction with other students within the structure of the course itself. This impacted not only on their feelings of isolation but also on their chances of making employment related contacts and ultimately on their willingness to attend graduation ceremonies for fear of knowing no one there.

Distance graduates commented on being treated by the university as 'less important' than full-time students. They articulated never feeling part of the university and felt excluded from

institutional supports. Critically they did not avail of the Careers Service. The consequence for part-time/distance students is potentially serious. They must discern for themselves the impact of structural inequalities and how delayed participation in higher education plays out in the labour market.

Notwithstanding the challenges, eighty five per cent of graduates stated that they would complete further study by distance education, many believing that the course helped them become more open to new ideas (84%); communicate their ideas more effectively (74%); increase their confidence (72%); and become more solution orientated (57%). The majority (80%) stated that they would recommend the course to a friend and identified that they could not have completed a degree any other way.

Seventy-seven per cent of graduate survey respondents said they felt comfortable with the other students on the course. The comfort they felt related to a cohort effect, studying with students similar to themselves in terms of age and socio-economic status.

While the distance graduates in this case study were adept at harnessing the social capital from their existing connections to support their persistence, they were less successful in pro-actively developing future orientated social capital to enhance employability opportunities.

The next section will explore the employability of distance graduates in more detail.

### 5.3 The post-participation phase

Basic employment related data (principal economic status, socio-economic group) was gathered in the main Graduate Survey (126 respondents, 47% response rate, Table 5.4 refers). An Employability Survey was also conducted to establish the factors graduates deem important to their employability and the extent to which they were in graduate level employment. All graduates from the years relevant to the study (2012-2015) received the Employability Survey at the end of 2015. This allows us to compare responses between graduates from various years. Ninety-seven graduates responded to this survey, representing a 36% response rate. Most respondents were BA graduates (70% n=68). Employability is defined in the literature as:

...a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (York 2004, p. 8)

Within the survey employability was defined for graduates as ‘your ability to get a job or get promoted in your existing job’. ‘Graduate’ employment relates to employment where graduates are required to use the skills and knowledge they have gained in their degree (Elias and Purcell 2013). It also commonly relates to employment for which a degree is an entry requirement.

This section explores the post-participation situation of graduates with a specific focus on employability. In relation to the Employability Survey, pre-entry and post-graduation employment related data for the same group of graduates is compared. This allows us to examine changes in employment post-graduation. The section also reports on the post-participation employability experiences of interviewees.

### 5.3.1 Principal economic status

We know from the Graduate Survey that eighty four per cent (n=106) of graduate respondents were in employment after graduation - the majority (67% n=85) in full-time employment (Table 5.4 refers).

**Table 5.8.** Employment group and economic status of graduates at entry and after graduation

	At entry		After graduation	
	%	N=268	%	N=126
<b>Employment Group</b>				
Employer/manager	9%	24	6%	8
Professional	24%	64	55%	69
Non-manual	29%	77	16%	19
Skilled manual	2%	5	3%	4
Semi or unskilled manual	3%	8	7%	9
Missing	33%	90	13%	17
Total	100%	268	100%	126
<b>Principal Economic Status</b>				
Employee	63%	169	80%	101
Self-employed	6%	16	4%	5
Home duties	3%	8	8%	10
Unemployed	5%	13	4%	5
Retired	2%	4	4%	5
Leave of absence	1%	2		
Missing data/unknown	20%	56		
Total	100%	268	100%	126

After graduation the majority of Graduate Survey respondents (84%) were in employment, with most classifying themselves as 'professional' (Table 5.8 refers).

Table 5.9 illustrates data from the Employability Survey, allowing us to compare employment related factors for the same group of graduates at entry and after graduation.

Eighty-eight per cent (n=85) of the respondents are employed after graduation compared to 64% (n=62) before graduation, a 24% increase.

**Table 5.9.** Comparison of socio-economic factors for graduates at entry and after graduation

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>At entry</b>		<b>After graduation</b>	
	<b>Per cent</b>	<b>Base N (97)</b>	<b>Per cent</b>	<b>Base N (97)</b>
<b>Principal economic status</b>				
In employment	57%	55	69%	67 (f/t)
In known part-time paid employment	4%	4	18%	17
Self-employed	3%	3	1%	1
Unemployed	12%	12	3%	3
Home duties			1%	1
Retired	2%	2	4%	4
Undertaking further full-time study			2%	2
Missing	22%	21	2%	2
<b>Socio-economic group</b>				
Employer/Manager	19%	19	19%	19
Professional	29%	28	34%	33
Non-manual	31%	30	26%	25
Skilled manual	3%	3	1%	1
Semi/Unskilled manual	1%	1		
Missing	17%	16	19%	19
<b>Employment Sector</b>				
Private	41%	40	52%	50
Public	21%	20	40%	39
Charity/Not-for-Profit	2%	2	7%	7
Missing	36%	35	1%	1
<b>Employment Classifications (NACE)</b>				
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	1%	1	1%	1
Mining and quarrying				
Manufacturing	7%	7	5%	5
Electricity, gas, air conditioning	1%	1	1%	1
Construction	2%	2		
Wholesale and retail trade	7%	7	3%	3
Transportation and storage	5%	5	2%	2
Accommodation and food services	2%	2	3%	3
Information and communication	14%	13	11%	11
Financial and insurance activities	5%	5	3%	3
Real estate activities	1%	1	1%	1
Professional, scientific and technical	9%	9	9%	8
Administrative and support services	2%	2	2%	2
Public administration and defence	4%	4	3%	3
Education	13%	12	15%	15
Human health and social work	5%	5	14%	13
Arts, entertainment and recreation	4%	4	4%	4
Missing	18%	17	23%	22
<b>Employment group (ISCO-08)</b>				
Managers	20%	19	20%	19
Professionals	13%	12	15%	15
Technicians and associate professionals	16%	16	18%	18
Clerical support workers	23%	22	23%	22
Service and sales workers	8%	8	3%	3
Craft and related trades workers	3%	3	1%	1
Plant & machine operators and assemblers	1%	1		
Missing	16%	16	20%	19
<b>All</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>97</b>

The number in part-time employment increased by 14%. The reasons for this are unclear; only one graduate is undertaking further part-time study and one further full-time study (Appendix H refers), so being involved in further post-graduate study does not account for the increase. As only one graduate was seeking full-time employment, indications are that graduates were, by and large, happy with their part-time employment status and may therefore have opted for it voluntarily.

Unemployment is down from 12% to 3% within the group. Of the 10 BSc graduates unemployed at entry, 7 were in full-time employment post-graduation. Most of these graduates attained employment during the course of their studies, and did not have to wait until they attained the degree. This reflects the enhanced post-recession employment prospects for those with Information Technology related knowledge in the Irish labour market.

More graduates classify themselves as retired post-graduation (+2%).

### **5.3.2 Socio-economic group**

The socio-economic group was estimated for graduates at the point of entry to their course, based on the job title and employment they provided in their application forms. The post-graduation data in table 5.9 has also been provided by the graduates. The Employer/Manager category has stayed the same (19%) but the Professional category is slightly higher after graduation (+5%) while the Non-manual category is lower by the same percentage i.e. 5%. No graduate is calling themselves 'unskilled' post-graduation.

### **5.3.3 Employment sector**

The largest single group of graduate respondents work in the Private Sector (52% n=50) - a similar number from each degree (n=28 BA compared with n=22 BSc). Forty per cent (n=39) work in the Public Sector, more regularly BA graduates (34% compared to 6%). A similar situation exists within the Not-for-Profit Sector which employs more BA (5%) than BSc (2%) graduates. Female graduates were more likely than males to work in the Public Sector (55% compared to 26%) and the Not-for Profit Sector (11% compared to 4%).

Employment in all sectors increased after graduation with the biggest increase (+19%) in the public sector, followed by the private (+11%) and not-for-profit sector (+5%)

#### **5.3.4 Employment classification**

Graduates were asked to provide the name of their employer and their job title. This data was used to classify graduates' employment and allocate them to an employment group using the ISCO and NACE classifications respectively.

The most notable difference in the NACE groups before and after graduation was the increase in the percentage of graduates working in the field of Human Health and Social work (from 5% to 14%; 85% were BA graduates). Many BA graduates had expressed interest in moving into careers in the fields of Psychology and Sociology and the evidence indicates that they have been successful in this endeavour. While numbers are small, there has been a general overall reduction, for example, in the numbers involved in Wholesale and Retail Trade and Transportation and Storage (from 12% to 5%). No-one is involved in construction post-graduation.

#### **5.3.5 Employment group**

No major changes are identifiable for graduates regarding employment group prior to entry and after graduation. However subtle changes are evident and important (Table 5.9 refers). More graduates use a professional employment title post-graduation (4%). Fewer graduates identify as Service and Sales Workers (-5%), Craft Workers (-2%) or Machine Operators and Assemblers (-1%).

Forty per cent (n=39) of graduate respondents identify holding a different and improved (in terms of socio-economic status) job after graduation than they did when they commenced their studies. This is illustrated in table 5.10. Sixty-two per cent of these graduates were BA (n=24) and the remainder (n=15) were BSc. A number of BA graduates moved into more senior positions in their existing organisations while a number were pursuing new careers in the field of teaching or psychology. This is likely reflected in the change to the NACE classifications in relation to Human Health and Social Work and Education. In relation to the BSc programme, the biggest change was for those moving from unemployment into employment.



### 5.3.6 Graduate earnings

The largest single group of graduates (31% n=30) were earning between €25,000 and €45,000 (Table 5.11 refers). Seventy-five per cent (n=45) of those working full-time fell into this earnings category. Sixty-seven per cent (n=10) of those working part-time and 5% (n=3) of those working full-time earn less than €25,000. Fifty per cent of those who are self-employed earn in excess of €85,000 per annum. More BSc than BA graduates (56% compared to 44%) and men compared to women (87% compared to 13%) earn in excess of €85,000.

### 5.3.7 Graduate mobility

Graduates were asked where they would be prepared to accept a job or promotion. There was a tendency for graduates to preference remaining in their local county (82% n=80). Forty-one per cent of graduates were prepared to move to another county in Ireland but few were prepared to move to the UK, Europe or beyond. Given the age cohort of graduates it is likely that they had perhaps established roots in their communities, for example with mortgage commitments and children in school which they were unwilling to disrupt. This may however limit their potential to attain graduate level employment or otherwise develop their careers, particularly for those living outside large cities. One interviewee who is keen to change career, refuses a role because the location is wrong:

*And then...a lady rang me from (company) last week and she was offering me project management roles in Cork (laughs) and I can't take that because my daughter is in school here (Dublin). (BSc Una Y)*

Graduates who were working outside Ireland (n=10) were asked what had influenced their decision to do this (Appendix I refers). The most common reason for graduates moving abroad was to gain employment. Five graduates said they moved abroad because they could not get a job in Ireland. Three moved abroad for a better salary, better work experience and improved career prospects. Two indicated that they wanted to work abroad while one was returning home to Australia and another was answering a religious calling. (Some respondents indicated multiple reasons.)

### **5.3.8 Length of time with current employer**

In relation to the length of time graduates had worked with their current employer, the largest single group (30% n=29) had been with their employer for five years or less (Table 5.11 refers). Given that the mean time frame for degree completion is 6.8 years, indications are that a large number of graduates changed employment subsequent to commencing their degree studies. Nine per cent had been with their employer for less than one year. If we interpret employability to indicate one's ability to get a job, a reasonably high level of employability is indicated for the graduates in this study.

**Table 5.10.** Comparison of job titles before study and after graduation

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Job title before graduation</b>	<b>Job title after graduation</b>
<b>BA</b>		
R7	Unemployed	Sports instructor
R42	Manager	Research officer
R6	Accountant	Financial controller
R3	Shop assistant	Administrator
R18	Administrator	Intake Counsellor
R16	Tailor	Second Level Teacher
R4	Clerical officer	Tutor
R2	Clerical officer	Higher Executive Officer
R17	Telesales	Accounts Manager
R24	Unemployed	Head Guide OPW
R38	Supervisor	Property Manager
R6	Care assistant	Accounts assistant
R22	Secretary	Clerical Officer
R29	General administrator	Clerical Officer
R51	Unemployed	Primary school teacher
R56	Business manager	Talent manager
R59	Retail manager	Secondary school teacher
R5	Maintenance technician	Change management Facilitator
R37	Nurse	Nurse Manager
R39	Customer Advisor	Financial Advisor
R45	Co-ordinator	Executive Assistant
R49	Unemployed	Clerical worker
R68	Sales assistant	Product Builder
R74	Clerical worker	Commercial Finance Partner
<b>BSc</b>		
R60	Catering Supervisor	IT Consultant
R61	Fitter	Control Engineer
R63	Unemployed	Senior SQL Developer
R73	Client Services Manager	Chief Executive Officer
R32	Technician	SAP IT Specialist
R14	VB Programmer	Business Analyst
R36	Technician	Project co-ordinator
R70	Unemployed	IT Consultant
R31	Unemployed	Business Development Partner
R53	Unemployed	NOC Engineer
R2	Unemployed	Events Co-ordinator
R3	Unemployed	IT Trainer
R19	Technician	Senior Solutions Consultant
R30	HEO	CEO
R33	Unemployed	IT Consultant

R=respondent

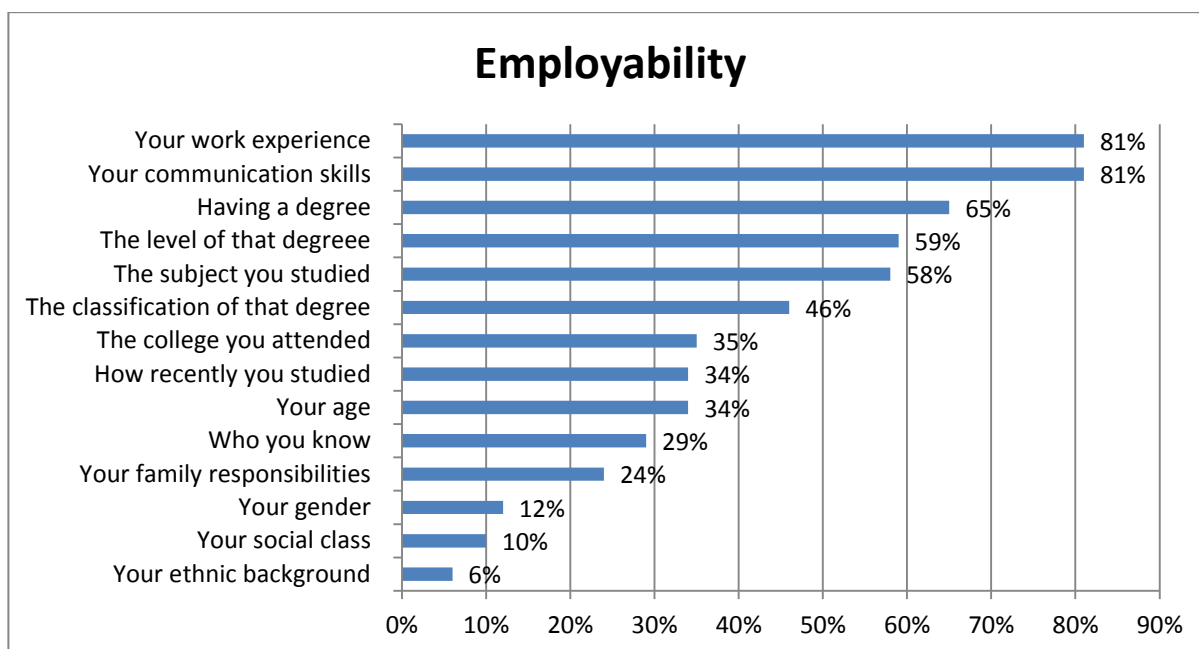
**Table 5.11.** Graduate earnings, mobility and length of time with current employer

Characteristic	Per cent	Base N
<b>Gross earnings per annum</b>		
Less than €25,000	18%	17
€25,000-€45,000	31%	30
€45,001-€65,000	25%	24
€65,001-€85,000	8%	8
More than €85,000	9%	9
Missing	9%	9
<b>Where would you accept job/promotion?*</b>		
In your home county	82%	80
In other parts of Ireland	41%	40
In the UK	21%	20
In another European country	24%	23
Outside Europe	24%	23
<b>How long with current employer</b>		
Less than 1 year	9%	9
1-5 years	30%	29
6-10 years	8%	8
11-15 years	11%	11
16-20 years	10%	10
More than 20 years	17%	16
Missing	15%	14
<b>Total</b>		<b>97</b>

\* Graduates had the option to select more than one location where they would be willing to accept a job/promotion.

### 5.3.9 Factors important to employability

Graduates were asked to rank the importance of various factors in relation to their employability (Figure 3.1). Terms such as ‘employability’, ‘level of degree’ and ‘classification’ were explained for respondents (see Surveys: Appendix B and C).



**Figure 5.14.** Percentage of graduates who reported that the given reason was very important or important in relation to their employability.

Eighty-one per cent of graduate respondents (n=79) perceived that their work experience was of key importance in terms of their ability to get a job or get promoted. This was slightly more important to those who worked in the not-for-profit (86%) and private (83%) sectors than the public sector (79%). It was equally important to all age groups with the exception of the 60-69 age group, only 50% of whom felt it was important. For this group age was a more important factor in relation to their employability.

Graduates thought communication skills were equally important as work experience for employability. We know from the Graduate Survey that 74% of graduates thought the degree had enhanced their ability to communicate their ideas more effectively (Figure 5.14 refers); this is good news then, for their employability.

A majority of graduate respondents (65%) thought that having the credential, i.e. the degree, was important in terms of their employability. This was more important to those working in the public sector (74%) than the private (66%) or not-for-profit sectors (57%). It is also important to point out that for many graduates, while the degree did not result in a job change, it had allowed them to remain relevant in their existing employment, perhaps even facilitating them to retain that employment in a period of serious economic recession:

*Pretty much our whole department was made redundant two and a half years ago, of 65 people only 10 of us are left. ...the skills that I learned studying, putting together essays and stuff, sure has helped me in an indirect way (BA Peter Y)*

*I have studied and passed a course of relevance to my job and brings my education level up to those of my colleagues. (BSc Male M)*

*It's (i.e. the degree) a basic requirement for all jobs I'd be going for and a very satisfactory achievement, it has also improved my skill set and the degree modules tied in exceptionally well with my day to day work requirements and vice versa. (BSc Male M)*

The level of the degree (i.e. level 8) and the subject studied were ranked as important to 59% and 58% of respondents respectively. These factors were regarded as more important to employability than the classification of the award (important to 46%) and the institution attended (important to 35%). In general the classification of award was ranked more highly in importance by those who attained a high classification, (with the exception of one graduate who attained a third class honours and who thought the classification of the degree was very important to employability) and by BSc graduates. On the other hand, the subject studied is identified as being of primary importance to the BA graduates, who acknowledge that the subject(s) studied was instrumental in career change and attainment of graduate level employment:

*The degree has given me the opportunity to start on a second career path (BA female M)*

*I completely changed profession...the course was a necessary factor in this change (BA male M)*

International research is conflicted in terms of the importance of the institution attended in relation to employability. Some theorists state that it is important (Ordine and Rose 2015) while others (Smyth and Strathdee 2010) found no employability advantage accruing from the institution attended, at least in the first few years after graduation. Kupfer (2011), perhaps most accurately, contests that everything depends on the specific national fields of HE and the labour market at a given time. While all the interviewees think that the reputation of the institution is important in terms of employability, the BA graduates appear to value it more highly than the IT graduates who were more inclined to place significance on the classification of the award.

When interviewees are asked whether they would disclose that they completed their degree through distance education they are unanimous that they think they should and would. Nine of the interviewees have LinkedIn profiles (4xBA, 5xIT), but only three (all BA) mention in their profiles that their degree was completed by distance education. They are keen to highlight that, as far as they are concerned, there is no distinction between their degree and that awarded to a student who has studied full-time. So although their discourse is around the equivalence of the degree, they are guarded in how, and to whom, they disclose the mode of delivery. One interviewee explains why he does not divulge this information:

*...they (employers) should be able to see that from your cv...that you were in employment and at the same time you did the degree. If they can't see that then you don't want to work for them (laughs). Certainly I wouldn't want to work for somebody who couldn't see that. You'd think 'oh my God, I'm outa here' (BSc Greg M).*

In general graduate survey respondents did not feel that their employability was impacted negatively by how recently they had studied (though all had studied recently) or their age. However, older graduates were more likely to think that age mattered in terms of their employability with 50% of those over 60 ranking it as important while no-one in the 18-29 age group did. The impact of age on employability will be explored in more detail in the interviewee accounts.

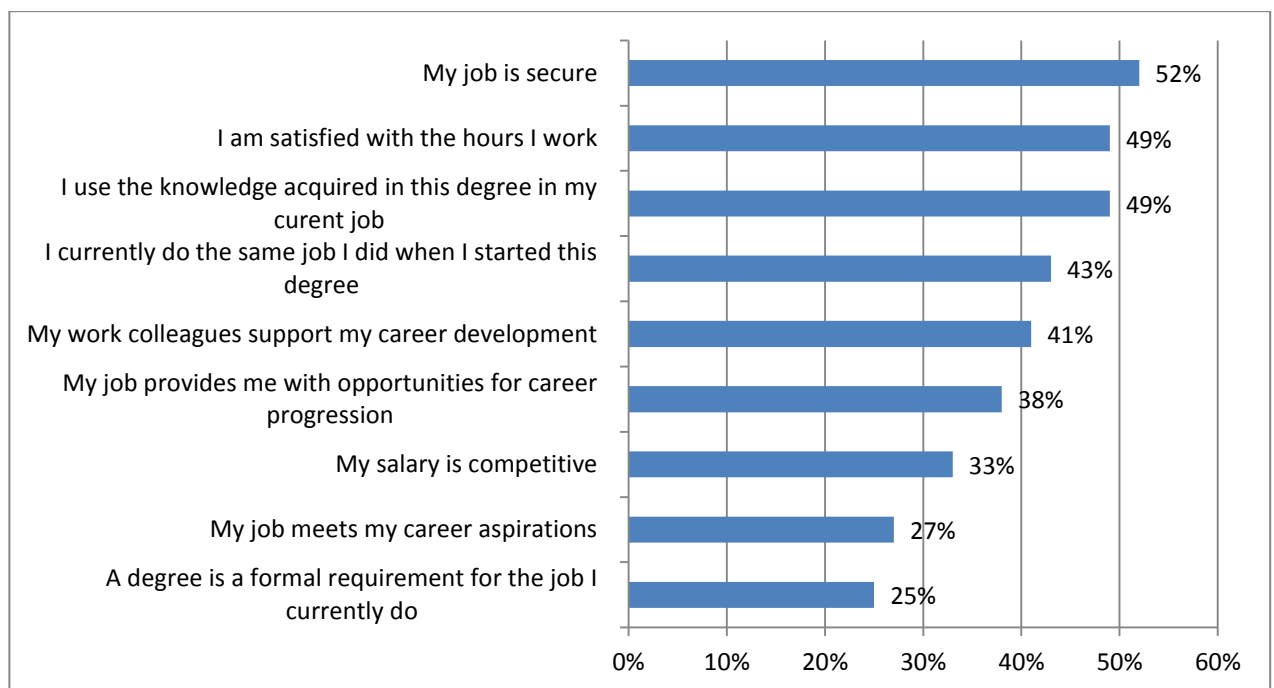
Graduate survey respondents ranked as unimportant social connections (important to just 29%) and family responsibilities (important to just 24%), though women were twice as likely as men (33% compared to 16%) to think that family responsibilities impacted their employability.

While few graduates thought gender was important in terms of employability more women (17%) than men (7%) thought this.

Social class was not thought to be an important factor in relation to employability, with just 10% of respondents regarding it as important. This is interesting given that the primary reason graduates did not have a degree related to social class. They think a degree will enhance their employability, yet they do not make a connection between social class and employability. Graduates' response here appears to indicate a belief that their success, or failure, is their responsibility alone, and that class is irrelevant. There appears to be a general lack of awareness of the impact of societal structures on HE participation and employability outcomes. This topic will also be explored in more detail in the interviewee accounts.

Finally, while ethnicity was in general not thought to impact employability, 33% of those from EU/EEA countries thought it important compared to 6% of Irish nationals. No non EU/EEA national thought it important. However, this might relate to the fact that they were exclusively white and English speaking.

### 5.3.10 Graduate level employment



**Figure 5.15.** Percentage of graduates who reported that, thinking about their current job, they strongly agree or agree with the given statement.

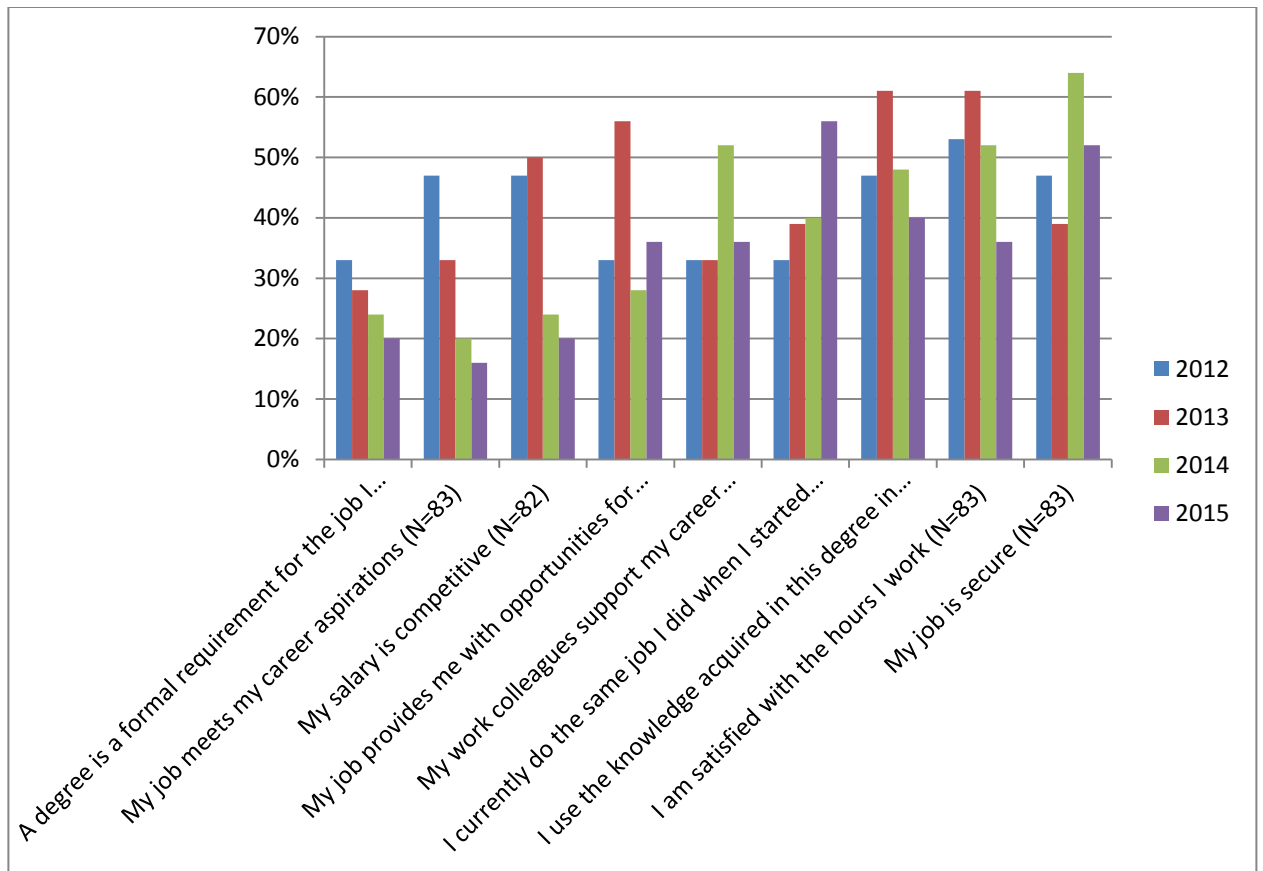


The Employability Survey sought to establish the extent to which graduates were in graduate level employment where they 'are required to use the knowledge and skills they had developed as undergraduates' (Elias and Purcell 2013, p. 14), or where a degree was an entry requirement for the job they held. Graduate employment also tends to relate to elite<sup>16</sup> employment. Graduates were asked about the extent to which they agree with various statements in relation to their current employment (Figure 5.15 refers). All graduates from the years relevant to the study (2012-2015) received the Employability Survey at the end of 2015. This allows us to compare responses between graduates from various years (Figure 5.16 refers).

In relation to the factors indicating elite employment, most graduates (52% n=51) think their job is secure. This was more strongly felt by those in the public sector (58%) compared to those in the not-for-profit sector (50%) or private sector (49%). Graduates were in general satisfied with the hours they worked (49% n=48) but this was most true for those in the not-for-profit sector (67%) followed by the private (51%) and then public sectors (45%). Those who earned between €65,000 and €85,000 were least happy with the hours they worked (just 29% were satisfied) while those who earned more than €85,000 were most happy (71%).

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<sup>16</sup> The literature refers to 'elite' employment as employment with the best labour market outcomes in terms of highest salary, best working conditions and best opportunities for advancement.



**Figure 5.16.** Percentage of graduates by year of graduation who reported that, thinking about their current job, they strongly agree or agree with the given statement.

Forty-nine per cent of graduate respondents indicated that they were in graduate level employment, to the extent that they use the knowledge acquired in the degree in their current job. This is most true for those who graduated in 2013 (61%) and least true for those who graduated most recently i.e. in 2015 (40%) (Figure 5.16 refers). Interviewees attest to how, even before they attained promotion, the degree had an impact on their job:

*How I did my job changed...you'd be in meetings and people would start... using lingo and language and definitions. And all of a sudden you realise... you have a much wider vocabulary in relation to business language... you can see people around the room who maybe haven't done a degree would be lost. And then roles came up, and not just internally but externally (BSc Leo M).*

The indications are that transitioning into graduate level employment is not something which happens immediately after graduation. Graduates likely needed time to position themselves to avail of promotional opportunities or may have needed further post-graduate study.

Importantly however, the evidence is that distance graduates do transition into graduate level employment, albeit slowly.

In relation to whether graduates still do the same job they did when they started the degree, overall 43% of respondents' state that they do. However, when we break this down on a yearly basis we see that it is much more likely to be true for those who graduated most recently (56%) compared to those who graduated in 2012 (33%) (Figure 5.16 refers). Moving into a new job does not necessarily mean moving into graduate level employment. By the same token staying in the same job does not mean graduates are not in graduate jobs. Some graduates may have already been in graduate level positions and the degree simply formalised that situation (Woodfield 2011); this could be why their job has not changed. This is evidenced in the following comments:

*I was working in an environment where younger staff with degrees were joining the organisation and were part of a team I managed. I quickly realised that they were not any smarter than me also my son completed his degree in 2005 and I thought if he can do it so can I. (BA Female M)*

*It validated my position if you know what I mean in that I'm now officially smart enough to have a degree and an engineering role (BSc Brendan M)*

A large percentage (41%) of graduates felt supported in their career development by colleagues though this was most true for those who worked in the not-for-profit sector (83%) compared to the private (39%) and public sectors (38%). Opportunities for career progression were thought to be more available in the private sector (52%) than in the public (21%) or not-for-profit (17%) sectors.

A minority of graduates felt their salary was competitive (33%) though this was more likely for those who graduated in 2012 (47%) than for those who graduated in 2015 (20%). Similarly, those who graduated in 2012 are 30% more likely than recent graduates (2015) to articulate that their job meets their career aspirations (Figure 5.16 refers).

The lowest level of agreement (25%) comes with the statement in relation to whether a degree is a formal requirement for the job graduates currently do. Once again this statement is most true for those who graduated in 2012 (33%) and least true for those who graduated in 2015 (20%) even though 40% of those who graduated most recently (2015) indicate that they use

the skills and knowledge gained in their degree in their everyday work. Sometimes this can be explained by the fact that graduates may be in graduate jobs which are not recognized as such by employers (Woodfield 2011). Interviewees highlight how having a degree had become the minimum entry requirement in the organisation in which they work and how undertaking the degree allowed them to remain competitive. Others highlight that they could not have attained their current job without a degree:

*...eleven years ago, you didn't have to have a degree whereas right now you can't get into the bank without a third level degree. I do think it will stand to me (i.e. having the degree), more so the fact that it was distance education. I just actually got one (i.e. a promotion) last October... (BA Emer Y)*

*I wouldn't have gotten it (current job) if I didn't have the degree. I mean I was in office admin work for years and years and I couldn't get out of that cycle but then once I had my degree I got the job easily enough (BA Bernadette Y)*

Transitioning to graduate employment for any graduate is not always a straightforward process and does not necessarily happen immediately after graduation. This transitioning process for distance graduates is explored in more detail in the interview findings. One interviewee puts it as follows:

*It's the accumulation of learning that builds your confidence that allows you to take things on. And some people have that anyway, you know, but I didn't (BSc Greg M).*

### 5.3.11 The Interviewees: Accounts of habitus, field and capital.

#### 5.3.11.1 *Habitus and time*

Every effort was made to replicate, as closely as possible, the overall graduate population when selecting candidates for interview (see Methodology chapter). The profile of interviewees is outlined in Appendix E. Of the seventeen graduates interviewed, sixteen (94%) were in graduate level employment. This section outlines the post-graduation employability experiences of the interviewees.

The survey findings indicated that graduates did not think age had a major impact on employability. Individual experiences, however, told a different story. Una is 39 years old when she graduates in 2015 and, although in a graduate role, has tried to move into project management. She has come up against barriers:

*All the jobs are for experienced people...two of the companies said that I was very old to be going in as a graduate with 19 and 20 years olds you know... It was horrible. It was the most demoralising experience going in there and coming back out because he was saying to me 'you're too old to be a graduate' and at the same time I don't have enough experience to be a project manager. I left quite disheartened. I felt where do I sit in the market? What should I be doing? My experience isn't transferring over at all (BSc Una Y).*

Una is clear that the jobs she sought went to those with relevant experience or, almost in contradiction, to young graduates. She has a first class honours degree but it is not enough. Companies say they require her to do an aptitude test. She thinks this is a ruse:

*Then they're like 'we're going to do an aptitude test cause we want the smartest of the smart' and I'm like... I got 90% in my exams... is it a case that they just want young people that they can mould?*

Una is an older graduate for reasons related to her social class. She relates the difficulties she has experienced in changing jobs to age alone. It is likely that moving into a new career is difficult for everyone as they get older. However, Una's sense of desperation is compounded by the fact that she has nobody to discuss the situation with:

*You know I have nobody...to talk to about this because I don't know anybody who works in a company doing project management or anything like that. Most of the people I know just work in quite normal jobs, they're not professional jobs (BSc Una Y).*

In this sense Una may differ from more middle class graduates who have more vertical social capital connections than she does (Feinstein et al. 2008). However, she had career opportunities early in her degree studies, which she now regrets not taking. She now thinks waiting until she finished her degree to start looking for her ideal job was a mistake. She did not fully recognise how the game was played (Bathmaker et al. 2013). This is something she is anxious to warn other distance students about.

Breda's experience is similar. Although in a graduate level position in the bank, she relates this more to the fact that the labour market has changed and everyone coming into the bank must now hold a degree (Brown, Reay and Vincent 2013). Holding the degree has not led to the promotions she hoped:

*But now you can't even come into the bank at a basic level without a degree and I'm two stages above that...I did apply (for promotion) a few times but I never got the promotion so anyway I have lost interest now (BA Breda M)*

Breda outlines how, in her view, the application process is quite subjective; once candidates meet the minimum requirements (currently a primary degree) they must submit a 300 word personal statement. The decision to promote is made on this basis:

*It seems to me that there seems to be no advantage to being there (internal) and in my case I think I would be judged to be too old now. I believe now, afterwards, from talking to people, that you need help structuring the 300 words, so I should have really spoken to somebody else, maybe outside, and asked was my 300 word application good enough here, but I didn't run it by anyone; I sent it in myself. (BA Breda M)*

Breda's approach to completing the personal statement was perhaps naïve and may betray her social class habitus. Completing forms of this nature is something middle class people often get help with from others with relevant knowledge and experience (Wells and Lynch 2012). Breda too did not recognise how the game was played here and may have lost out accordingly.

Social class habitus also comes through in Mary's (BA M) employability account. On completion of her degree Mary went on to do a Masters and subsequently secured funding for a PhD. She now works as a lecturer in an Irish university. However, in this role she has been unsuccessful in securing a permanent post, despite applying numerous times. This situation deprives her of certain privileges, for example in relation to leave entitlement, pensions, and research

opportunities, all of which are only available to permanent staff. At first she felt the unsuccessful outcome of her job applications was fair, thinking she was less suitable and/or less experienced than those who attained the post. However, Mary slowly came to realise she was as good as the other candidates and began to question, albeit internally, why she was not getting the permanent position. Initially Mary relates the problem to age:

*I sincerely believe...there is an ageist agenda. That's unspoken but if you look at appointments the profile of appointed candidates is quite young, it's very young.*

As our conversation progresses Mary reflects that the discrimination might also relate to mode of study:

*...appointments that are made in (named university) are made to young people who came through the normal system, ...through Oxford and Cambridge...the normal way, as opposed to non-traditional students and that's not bitterness but it is an observation. (BA Mary M).*

Initially Mary felt no sense of entitlement to the permanent position, even though she has been teaching and researching in this institution for a number of years. This is, according to Skeggs (2004), one of the main identifiers of class difference:

*Embodied entitlement is one of the most class-ridden ways of moving through space (metaphorical and physical). It is a way of carrying value on the body, a process in which we are all implicated intimately every day (Skeggs 2004, p. 26).*

Indeed many of the graduates consider themselves *lucky* to have achieved what they did, given their working-class start in life:

*I thought I was much more advantaged than anyone else in the family, hugely advantaged compared to the rest of them. I got a great start. I walked into a job after the (level 6) course. A pretty decent job at the time. So no I wasn't disadvantaged. But the accountancy wouldn't be what I would do again (BA James Y).*

*I feel very lucky now I must say (BSc Eddie M).*

*The generation before me didn't go to secondary school. We were lucky we had the free second level education. From my mother's point of view if it wasn't free I wouldn't have gone, I can tell you that... (BA Breda M)*

There is little evidence throughout the study that graduates feel entitled to what they have achieved. They tend to relate their experiences to ones of individual agency as opposed to connecting them to societal structures.

#### ***5.3.11.2 Habitus and field: no self left behind?***

When we examine whether and how the graduates' progress in the field of graduate level employment and develop a graduate identity it is evident that it is by no means a straight forward process. Holmes (2013) identifies that employability is something which takes place 'over time and in interaction with others' (p. 548). However, in addition to this external process of convincing others that they are worthy of promotion/employment, it seems from the interviews with graduates, that they must also convince themselves that they have something worthwhile to offer.

When asked about the impact of having a degree on his employability Mark (BSc Y) is categorical that it did impact positively. However, he is also keen to point out that he did not always think that way:

*For me it has definitely impacted. Initially when I finished in 2007, I suppose the degree I did, the IT degree, I felt coming out it was very, very generic, very broad.*

Mark had wanted a vocational degree, one which qualified him as a Computer Programmer. Initially, he struggles to see the relevance of his broad IT degree. If he finds it hard to see its relevance, then so too will others. Despite the fact that Mark has a degree, nothing changes for him for three years. It took this time for Mark to realise that, in the absence of promotion, he should accept work and responsibilities in which he could use the skills and knowledge he had developed in his degree in order to better position himself to build social connections within his organization and to avail of promotional opportunities when they arose. Having pursued this strategy for a number of years, Mark attained a graduate position.

On completion of her BA Margaret immediately applied for a position on a Higher Diploma in Education to become a teacher. She outlines how she suffered several 'crises of confidence' during this period, sometimes saying to herself:



*I don't know what I'm doing studying. Here I am at 40 years old; I don't know what I was thinking. Nobody is going to want a 40 year old (new) teacher. What makes you think you can do this? Who do you think you are? I was lucky got what I got...you're pushing it now like...that should be it... (BA Margaret Y)*

Margaret's crises appear to be less about confidence (capacity to successfully complete) and more about identity (capacity to successfully belong). She goes on to secure employment with a secondary school. The Principal in the school has given her the unpopular task of organising the timetable. Margaret comments:

*It's horrible work. But the reason I got that is I'm a secretary, I'm used to the admin. And she (the principal) knows that. She sees your past and she pulls it in.*

A striking example of Margaret's unresolved graduate identity is evident when she says she *is* a secretary. She continues to see herself as a secretary, a job she held for twenty years. It is likely that to progress further in her career, Margaret will have to begin to see herself first and foremost as a teacher, and be prepared to push for more in the way of teaching responsibilities. She identifies that she suffers from 'imposter syndrome':

*There is always this fear that I will be found out...I've looked into this and...it's imposter syndrome...and I realise I've suffered that all of my life ok and hopefully I'm getting over that but...I'm the only person I know that did this part-time, the degree and the H. Dip.*

Margaret's sense of graduate identity is further undermined as she sees no-one from a similar background to herself in the role she occupies. Margaret is more inclined to see her insecurities as a personal flaw rather than relate them to structural factors (Brown and Hesketh 2004).

Ali completed her degree in 2001 and went on to complete post-graduate study and qualify as a Psychologist, while at the same time working in the Human Resources (HR) department of a large financial institution. She relates an incident at a work-related training course she attended as a participant:

*We were asked to introduce ourselves, it went around the room, I was about the third person. Afterwards a lady my own age came over to me and said 'oh thank God you're not a psychologist; most of the people doing this seem to be psychologists'. And I kind of went (coughs) 'Well actually I am'. And she said 'Oh you never said'. So I actually couldn't say the words 'I am a psychologist'. I couldn't actually get those words out. And I went away and I said 'what's that about?'*

Ali is unable to call herself a Psychologist; she does not feel 'entitled' in the most literal sense. Ali connects this inability to see herself as a Psychologist to the fact that she had remained with the same employer while transitioning from the role of clerical worker to the position of organizational Psychologist.

Moving into graduate employment in a field unrelated to their previous work-experience can be difficult for mature graduates (Draper et al. 2014). Financial and family commitments often prevent part-time graduates from re-starting a career in a graduate role. Dominic is critically aware of this limitation. Like Ali, he too concentrated his efforts on moving roles within his existing employment. He gradually took on more responsibility for staff training and development, building internal connections within the organization while concurrently pursuing a Masters in Organisational Behaviour. Interestingly, for Dominic, the difficulty in seeing himself as a graduate directly related to him having pursued his degree by distance education. During his distance studies he had kept his attendance at the university to a minimum. He identifies this as the reason why he struggled to believe he actually was a graduate. This came to the fore when he started a part-time Masters' degree:

*When I started my Masters I felt I had never been in college and here I was doing a Masters; I nearly had a panic attack. I know I had a degree, and I know it was well accredited and recognised but my head couldn't believe that I had a degree and that I had been in university and that I deserved my place on the Masters.*

Dominic's internal work focused on convincing himself that he was a graduate and worthy of his place on the Masters programme. Concurrently he began to strategise to change roles within his existing employment, something which took a couple of years to achieve; he had just succeeded in attaining a new position prior to the interview. His concerns now relate to how others within the company will accept him in this new role.

Mary is successful in terms of transitioning into graduate level employment but nevertheless sees that within the field in which she is working, i.e. HE, discrimination exists against those who have come through the non-traditional route, particularly in the elite institution where she works. Mary still does not identify the convergence between age, mode of study and social class. Only when I point this out to her does she reflectively acknowledge there may be a connection. Matthys (2012), in his study of working class full-time graduates identifies that career progression can be limited due to a lack of cultural and social capital. Mary lacks neither.

The effect of social structures is apparent in Mary's story; the familial and societal notion, prevalent when she left school, that education was a waste of time for women, together with her social class habitus, all directed her away from progressing directly into university study.

In the final analysis Mary is philosophical about her situation. She is not prepared to fight a battle she cannot win, demonstrating an understating of the rules of the current game and how they impact her position:

*I thought if I take it (the issue of promotion) on it's going to take all my energy. I think if I did that I wouldn't be asked back to teach next year... and is that really what I want to do when I can still continue what I enjoy doing which is working in the classroom and researching? (BA Mary M).*

The degree has been a very important achievement for Mary:

*But I did feel that (getting the degree) brought me a validation. I suppose being at home with children eats away at your confidence as well. Who are you? What do you do? So now I had this other validation and I found that was hugely important in terms of my own identity. I mean if you had told me on the first day that I came up here, that was in 1995, if you had told me that 20 years down the line I'd be lecturing in (named institution) and described as an adjunct lecturer, I would have said 'ah no, that's too much, I can't imagine that'. But I think in terms of permanent employment I am recognising now that age and non-traditional route is a factor.*

Francy (BSc Y) on the other hand has not been so successful in terms of career progression. He continues to work for the company he entered as an apprentice electrician in the late 1980s where he quickly became involved in the Trade Union, ultimately becoming the Union Representative. His father worked in the company before him, holding similar roles. This is in his blood. Despite attaining the degree, career progression has, with the exception of one minor promotion, eluded Francy. During the interview he talks a good deal about his role as Trade Union representative. I ask him whether he thinks his involvement in the Union might be impeding his promotion. It is evident this is something he has already considered:

*It could be. A lot of people have been silenced by stripes being put on their shoulders... management have seen that as a way of silencing them. So they either ignore you or promote you. So I've fallen...on the ignore side. Which is fine by me.*

However, in truth it is not fine by him as he is desperately disappointed about his lack of career progression. While the degree may be 'the currency of opportunity' (Brown 2003, p. 142), it was not, in this instance, enough (Tomlinson 2008). Francy must reconcile his desire to

challenge management with his desire to be part of management. This internal identity negotiation appears ongoing.

#### ***5.3.11.3 Stories of capital: graduates as agents of social transformation***

Some of the interviewees are in senior management positions within large organisations and play a key role in recruitment. Asked how they would view candidates who had completed a degree on a part-time basis they are unequivocal that this would put the candidate ahead of the competition:

*...when you see somebody in their CV and their work and their accreditation overlap you understand the commitment they have made to achieve that (BSc Leo M)*

*I'd think they were higher achievers than the person who hadn't done that. Cause I've done it you see. I know how hard it is to balance things. (BSc Greg M).*

Brendan, also in a recruiting position, extends this point further by articulating that in his view upskilling people from within the organisation has many advantages over bringing in graduates from the outside:

*So if I had a choice of taking someone off the floor in the morning to become an engineer or getting a graduate in, the guy from the floor would wipe the floor with him...because he has all that in the background...(BSc Brendan M).*

This finding would appear to relate to that of Brown and Hesketh (2004) who outline how employers prefer to recruit candidates in their own image and likeness. Their study referred to elite employers. However, the evidence from this DCU study indicates that this theory may apply across the social spectrum.

Nine of the interviewees (53%) are involved, either through their employment or outside their employment, in the personal development of others, particularly in relation to education. (Julie hopes to return to work in community development when her children are older.) They indicate that the path they followed through HE has made them more aware of those who get left out of the system. Mary is involved in and committed to adult education. She reflects:

*I think ...maybe I wouldn't have been as good (an educator) if I had come through the normal route. (BA Mary M).*

James (BA Y) too echoes this sentiment. He has gone on to study for a Masters in History (online). For him it is important to contribute to his local community by giving talks to the local historical society and submitting articles to the local paper. He also helps with mock interviews for leaving certificate students in the local school. He observes that a local factory pulls a lot of the local young people out of education and into work. They are swayed by having money in their pockets:

*...they're just comfortable working there and they can pull 300-400 euros a week and some are very smart young fellas. It's all ok until the factory goes. They don't see that. They don't see anything outside their little small circle. (BA James Y)*

James endeavours to help these young people identify options, through full or part-time study, helping them to see what education might offer them now or in the future.

Eddie too reflects on all the people he has seen in the organisation where he works who were capable of much more than they achieved:

*Because over the years when I was working as an electrician or a technician, the people I worked with there would have been well capable and some of them would have had it in their head but it was either down to expense or 'what would I be doing going to university for'? You know...They would have made great engineers (BSc Eddie M).*

Through their education the graduates have attained social mobility but more importantly they have become more aware of social inequality. This was not something they started out with but something that has nevertheless happened through personal growth. Their sense of social responsibility is very much at the heart of how they now live their lives.

When it comes to their own families, interviewees indicated a determination to ensure their children progress to university.

Una (BSc Y) is adamant that she wants her daughter to complete a full-time honours degree ('nothing less') on completion of second level. She also outlines that it is important to her that her daughter knows that she (Una) completed a university degree, something which she thinks will make it easier for her to motivate her daughter. She recollects that when her mother wanted her to study she would say 'but you never did, why should I?' She does not want to find herself in this position with her daughter.

Other interviewees indicate a similar determination in relation to their children. Eddie (BSc M) sums it up well in the following statement about his children:

*...we certainly expect them to go to college and they would know that*

These accounts indicate the positive benefits on widening participation and the wider impact on social capital across generations.

### **5.3.12 Summary of post-participation findings**

The evidence from this case suggests that part-time distance graduate successfully transition into graduate level employment. Many totally changed career, while others were promoted in their pre-participation employment. A number identified that the degree allowed them to remain relevant in their existing employment, to stay in the game, rather than finding themselves unemployed in what was a period of severe economic recession in Ireland.

Graduates single out work experience and communication skills as the most significant factors in relation to their employability. Having a degree, the level of that degree and the subject studied were regarded by graduates as more important to their employability than the classification of the award obtained or the institution attended.

There was a tendency for distance graduates to preference employment in their local county, with few prepared to move outside Ireland for a job or promotion. This may limit their potential to attain graduate level employment.

Graduates, in particular those who completely changed career, often struggled to identify with their new role and related suffering from 'imposter syndrome'. Although they were outwardly successful in the transition they often continued, in some cases for many years, to internally identify with the role they previously held. This may inhibit their progression within that career. The literature identifies that employability is something which takes place 'over time and in interaction with others' (Holmes 2013, p. 548). This research posits that, for distance graduates, in addition to this external process of convincing others, the graduate must also convince themselves of the value of their own achievement. The evidence from this case is that transitioning to graduate employment, and developing a graduate identity, can be a slow *external and internal* process of negotiation.

Indications are that graduates do not perceive of themselves as having been disadvantaged by inequalities in the field of HE. On the contrary they feel lucky to have had the opportunities they did, given their socio-economic background.

Bourdieu (1979, p. 104/5) contends that in terms of scholastic age and in relation to educational capital, 'lost years are a step towards relegation or elimination'. While it can be difficult to make up for early experiences of educational disadvantage, the graduates in this study appear more likely to have been positively 'distinguished' rather than 'eliminated' by their completion of a part-time university degree as mature adults. Resulting from their studies, distance graduates regularly attain graduate level employment and social mobility. Even for those who appear to be standing still, the degree is facilitating them to remain employed in a period of economic recession, rather than being eliminated from the workforce.

## **5.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter presented the findings of the case study in relation to the three key experiential phases identified in the literature. This chapter explored the experiences of the distance graduates during each of these phases in order to answer the research questions posed by this study. The next chapter, chapter six, will revisit the research questions and draw the findings from the study together. The next chapter will also conclude the study.

## 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 Revisiting the research questions

This thesis explored the experience of part-time distance university graduates through a case study methodology. Multiple sources of evidence were used to gather data, including institutional records, graduate surveys and graduate interviews. The research questions posed by this study were subdivided into a number of associated sub-questions, each related to a particular experiential phase in the life of the graduates as follows:

Pre-participation phase: Why, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, do people complete an undergraduate degree by part-time distance education?

Are distance graduates new to, or from socio-economic groups under-represented in, higher education?

What role does social class play in their HE access experience?

Participation phase: How have distance graduates experienced the field of university education?

What obstacles do successful students face?

How do successful distance students accrue capital from their social networks, both inside and outside their courses?

Post-graduation phase: How does completion of a distance degree impact on employability?

Are 'lost years a step toward relegation or elimination' (Bourdieu 1979, p. 105) for distance graduates?

How does social class impact on the employability of graduates?

This chapter proposes some answers to these questions in conclusion to the thesis.



### 6.1.1 Pre-participation phase

#### ***Are distance graduates new to, or from socio-economic groups under-represented in, HE?***

I was surprised by the extent to which distance graduates were NOT new to HE. On reflection, this should not have surprised me. The massification of HE is directing working-class students into some form of post-compulsory education. Some, who might be quite capable of university study, are funnelled into lower status courses. Forty per-cent (n=106) of those who completed a level 8 honours distance degree had completed a prior level 6 (25%) or level 7 (15%) qualification. Sixty-eight per cent completed this prior learning on a part-time basis. Most had been participating in post compulsory education, incrementally since leaving school. Their protracted participation can cause them to lose out on economic capital, as those with level 8 qualifications or higher, perform better in the labour market. It can also cause them to lose out on academic capital, if their prior qualification is deemed unsuitable for accreditation of prior learning (APL). Thirty four per cent (n=92) of the graduates never completed any form of prior HE. Seventy-four per cent (n=198) of graduates were new to university.

The graduates belonged to an under-represented HE group based on their adulthood. I knew that at the commencement of the study. Their adulthood was the reason for their participation in distance education (as they had work and family commitments), not the cause of it. The focus of this study is on causes, in particular on social class. The institutional records indicate that a large group of the graduates in this study (31% n=85) could be classified to a socio-economic group currently under-represented in Irish higher education when they commenced their distance degree studies. However, a similarly large group (35%, n=93) did not belong to an under-represented social category. But social class is not simply about the socio-economic group to which one currently belongs. It relates more fundamentally to our social class of origin, the class to which we belonged at the time decisions about our progress to HE were being made.

The survey findings indicate that 64% (n=81) of graduate respondents came from a background where their father had either belonged to a lower socio-economic group, was retired, deceased or otherwise missing from their lives at the time they, the graduate, completed compulsory education. Fifty per cent (50% N=62) of graduates' parents' (both father and

mother) highest educational qualification is low secondary level or below. These graduates are characteristically working class. Based on their age, socio-economic background and prior education the graduates in this study are from under-represented groups.

***What role, if any, did social class play in the HE access experience of distance graduates?***

The graduates demonstrate a working class habitus as being fundamental to whether or how they progressed to HE on completion of second level study. Their decisions regarding transitioning to HE at the end of second level education were primarily constrained by the financial circumstances and social class habitus of their families, which limited the choice of what was possible. Where graduates did progress to HE, they chose short courses, close to where they lived and where possible, courses which were free or better still, for which they received a stipend to attend. Graduates sought to enter the work-force as soon as possible after completion of compulsory education, in order to become financially independent.

Notwithstanding their social class, graduates received limited advice about university in the second-level schools they attended. This often resulted in them making ill-informed decisions about subject choice and level, which subsequently impacted their eligibility to enter university, should they have chosen to do so. Neither did they receive advice on part-time higher education options. In general, graduates' parents had not participated in HE and so the graduates were reliant on the advice they received in school. There appears to be a lack of awareness of the likely relevance of part-time and life-long learning in particular for working class students. This is important as graduates in this study often spent a long time trying to find a way to upgrade their initial low level qualifications. Graduates indicate no sense of entitlement to this information, and accept its general invisibility in the public arena.

Wanting or needing to be available for work was the key reason why graduates chose distance education, and is also indicative of their working-class habitus. Their choice of delivery mode was determined by work and/or caring responsibilities. An aversion to debt was evident in their accounts, a factor often associated with working class students. Debt aversion regularly caused graduates to delay university participation until they could fund it from their disposable income, or until they were established in employment where their employer funded participation. This inevitably meant that graduates were older than traditional students when

they commenced their distance university degree, a factor which could subsequently impact negatively on their labour market outcomes. While graduate accounts reveal a long held desire to complete a university degree, social class determined whether, when and how they participated in university study.

### **6.1.2 Participation phase**

#### ***What obstacles do successful students face in the field of distance university education?***

The greatest obstacle to successful completion was the time demands of family and job, important to 58% of survey respondents. Their participation took place at a time in their lives when work and family demands are at their peak; the majority of graduates were in the 30-49 age group. The time demands of work and family impacted on the duration of study, and therefore on the effort required to sustain motivation.

Graduates also identified systems and structures as obstacles to their success. Isolation was frequently mentioned as problematic, particularly in relation to the dearth of opportunity for interaction with other students within the structure of the course itself. This impacted not only on their feelings of remoteness, but also on their chances of making employment related contacts and ultimately on their willingness to attend graduation ceremonies for fear of knowing no one there. Strategies to break down the isolation experienced by distance students need to be constantly (re) assessed. The importance of university staff who have shared the non-traditional student experience can be valuable. So too can the inclusion of collaborative assessment methods from course commencement. Structures which support the progression of distance students within the same group are worthy of consideration once flexibility is not overly compromised.

Distance graduates commented on being treated by the institution as 'less important' than full-time students. They articulated never feeling part of the university and felt excluded from institutional supports. Yet non-traditional students in full-time HE receive sustained targeted support. Notions of flexibility often appeared meaningless, when distance graduates, whose primary concern was their work and family commitments, had to conform to regulations devised to deal with the predominantly full-time student population, whose primary concern

was their course of study. Work is the legitimate priority of part-time students and institutional recognition of this fact is important.

***How do successful distance students accrue capital from their social networks, both inside and outside their courses?***

Graduates were highly dependent on the support of their social networks, in particular their families, in order to successfully complete their degree. Family time and disposable income were eaten into by degree completion, and many graduates recognised that they could not have successfully completed without family support.

An important finding from this research was the extent to which distance graduates felt comfortable with the other students on the course. The comfort distance graduates felt related to a cohort effect, studying with students similar to themselves in terms of age and socio-economic status. They used this social network to keep each other going, to rekindle their motivation when the going got tough or they felt particularly isolated. These forms of capital typify what Feinstein et al. (2008 p.22) identify as 'bonding' or 'horizontal' capital.

However, many graduates were supported financially by their employers. The importance of this form of capital should not be underestimated. Without it, some graduates may never have completed their degree. Additionally, graduates developed close relationships with tutors, which supported their persistence. Several distance tutors have themselves studied as adults and they may have acted as role models for the graduates; though an investigation of this aspect is beyond the scope of this research. This type of capital is regarded as 'vertical', as it is linking graduates with influential individuals, those who may positively influence the graduate's outcomes and future.

There was less evidence, particularly during the participation phase, that the graduates accrued vertical social capital from their connections with other students or with institutional services. One such connection, which could benefit them greatly, is with the Careers Service. In fairness to the graduates, they may have been unclear of their entitlement to such support. The consequence for distance graduates of a lack of career guidance and planning is potentially serious for their employability. They must decipher how to position themselves to avail of

promotional opportunities in their existing area of expertise or within their new area of expertise. They must learn how to manage transitioning to graduate level employment with a new employer or, perhaps more challengingly, with their existing employer. They must master a new graduate identity. Lack of professional guidance in this regard can seriously compromise their ability to leverage economic capital from their distance degree.

Nevertheless, graduates have accrued valuable cultural capital from their investment in HE. They have been successful in gaining an honours degree; one which they were careful to ensure was not flagged in any way as 'different'. Within the constraints of their social situation, they have done as much as they can to ensure the value of their credential.

There was also evidence that graduates positioned themselves to avail of career advancement within and outside their pre-graduation employment, in the long term. Linking social capital was important to achieve this. The evidence from this case suggests that graduates slowly build vertical social connections which assist them in transitioning into graduate level employment.

Finally, through the completion of university study, graduates also made a positive contribution to their familial social capital. Through their enhanced employability, they have helped secure the economic situation of their families. Their children will not be first-generation students and on that basis may feel more prepared, entitled and self-assured if and when they enter university.

### **6.1.3 Post-participation phase-graduate employability**

#### ***Are 'lost years a step toward relegation or elimination' for distance graduates?***

It was possible to compare entry and post-graduation employment related factors for a specific group of graduates (n=97). Within this group 24% more graduates were employed post-graduation. Forty per cent of graduate respondents to the Employability Survey identifying holding a different, and improved, job post-graduation than at the commencement of their studies. Others identified that the degree allowed them to remain relevant in their existing employment, to stay in the game, rather than finding themselves unemployed in what was a period of severe economic recession in Ireland.

The majority of interviewees (n=10) had transitioned into a new career for which a degree is required. Another group (n=6) identify being in graduate level employment, primarily due to occupational restructuring (Brown, Reay and Vincent 2013) to the extent that the jobs they were in have become graduate jobs as a result of the rise in entry requirements for technical and managerial positions. However, the graduates are clear that they use the skills and knowledge gained in their degrees in their day-to-day jobs. Additionally, they attribute being able to retain, and progress in, their jobs during a period of economic recession, directly to degree attainment.

The indications from this case study are that transitioning into graduate level employment is not something which happens immediately after graduation. Graduates needed time to position themselves to avail of promotional opportunities or required further post-graduate study, particularly if they wanted to change career. Importantly however, the evidence is that distance graduates do transition into graduate level employment, albeit slowly.

Bourdieu (1979, p. 104/5) contends that in terms of scholastic age and in relation to educational capital, 'lost years are a step towards relegation or elimination'. While it can be difficult to make up for early experiences of educational disadvantage, the graduates in this study appear more likely to have been positively 'distinguished'<sup>17</sup> rather than 'eliminated' by their completion of a part-time university degree as mature adults. Resulting from their studies, distance graduates regularly attain graduate level employment and social mobility. Even for those who appear to be standing still, the degree is facilitating them to remain employed in a period of economic recession, rather than being eliminated from the workforce.

Additionally, graduates indicate a sense of personal fulfilment as a result of degree completion. They outline how they have become more open to new ideas (84%), better able to communicate their ideas effectively (74%) and more confident (72%). Such factors are important to employability but also to personal transformation.

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<sup>17</sup> Taken from Bourdieu's (1979) famous text on social reproduction: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

### ***How does social class impact on the employability of graduates?***

Hesketh (2003, p. 10) points out that 'The discourse of employability encourages individuals to view their personal characteristics – be they social class, gender or race – as irrelevant'. The evidence from this DCU research would suggest they are not irrelevant. Class impacts on whether, when and how, students participate in higher education, and this in turn impacts on their employability.

As a result of their social class the graduates in this study are older than traditional graduates. They have regularly been in the work-place for many years and have developed a work identity. Transitioning into new employment is a complex process. Holmes (2013) identifies that employability is something which takes place 'over time and in interaction with others' (p. 548). However for the graduates in this study, in addition to this external process of convincing others that they are worthy, they also had to convince themselves they had something worthwhile to offer.

Even when the graduates transition into graduate employment, they struggle to believe they actually belong in their new jobs. Superimposing a graduate identity on a pre-existing, and established, work identity is by no means a straightforward process. Yet it is important that this takes place in order for graduates to see themselves as worthy and so progress in their new careers. For the graduates in this study, in addition to possession of skills and competencies, graduate identity relates to their belief in their capacity to successfully belong to a particular group.

The evidence from this case therefore is that transitioning to graduate employment, and developing a graduate identity, is not solely an *external* process but is also an *internal* process of negotiation.

The graduates often present their difficulties as ones of individual agency. However, social structures are equally conspicuous in their accounts. An understanding of structural obstacles would perhaps help them to leave down a burden of inadequacy and un-entitlement and allow them to move forward with confidence and self-assurance.

## 6.2 Critical Reflections on Bourdieu

Atkinson (2011 p. 344) challenges us 'to work with *and against* Bourdieu in the business of empirical practice; that is, to be unafraid to deviate from the famed thinker when findings demand it' (original emphasis). In this section, I will outline two important limitations relating to Bourdieu's social reproduction framework that emanate from the findings of this thesis.

The first limitation relates to the acceptance by Bourdieu of the doxa<sup>18</sup> that full-time HE provision is best. Data in this DCU study reveal that participants were inclined to pursue higher education on completion of compulsory education, but were limited in this endeavour by their social class habitus which most regularly manifested itself in economic or, in a related sense, academic obstacles. This often caused graduates to delay their participation in HE, or to participate in short, non-degree courses which allowed them to enter the labour market quickly and become financially independent; something which they and their families valued. Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus helps us understand this action as part of a totality of structures (economic, social and cultural) that form subjectivities.

However, Bourdieu is critical of delayed participation in HE and clear that in relation to 'scholastically acquired cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1979, p.82), 'lost years are a step towards relegation or elimination' (Bourdieu 1979, p.104/5). In so doing Bourdieu is endorsing a practice set up primarily by, and for, the middle classes. Those who are wealthier can afford to study full-time therefore they determine that studying full-time is better.

This study revealed that the system of full-time degree completion is not necessarily better for everyone; in particular it may not suit working class students who often require something different, something more flexible. The graduates in this DCU study decided that part-time HE was better *for them*. While it is important to see structure in agency (Warren and Web 2007) it is also important to 'foreground the contemporary moment' (Warren and Webb 2007 p. 10). These graduates wanted or needed to be available to attend to other commitments, for example work and family. They could not *go to university* and needed the *university to go to*

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<sup>18</sup> Bourdieu defines 'doxa' as the 'point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view' (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 57).



*them*. The attainment of a part-time degree allowed them to transition into graduate level employment with the ensuing improvement in status, salary and personal satisfaction that entailed.

International studies too suggest that adults favour part-time HE (European Commission 2015) and that they are likely to have delayed their participation in HE for reasons related to social class (Brine & Waller 2004; Chesters and Watson 2014; Croxford and Raffe 2014). Evidence indicates that this extended/delayed participation does not lead to 'relegation or elimination'. Rather, it can have positive outcomes in terms of personal development and employability (Blanden et al. 2010; Chesters 2014b; Purcell et al. 2007; Woodfield 2011, Woodfield 2011).

Although graduates in this DCU study, who are in graduate level employment, often struggled with building a graduate identity on top of a pre-existing work based identity, such difficulties may not relate entirely to delayed participation. They could, for example, be attributable to habitus. Matthys' (2012) study found that working class graduates had difficulty reaching the top of their professions for reasons related to cultural and social capital. The participants in Matthys' study had not delayed their participation in university. It would appear that underlying issues of habitus are more important to outcomes than a delay in participation *per se*.

Arguably there are grounds for deviating from Bourdieu's views on delayed completion of HE at this point in time.

The second limitation relates to Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the field of HE as a structured space, with institutions ranked in relation to the capital they can bestow. While Bourdieu's theories illuminate differences *between* various institutions they are less useful when analysing differences *within* a particular institution.

Within DCU there is a divergence of practice. The Open Education Unit operates an open access policy unrelated to academic attainment at entry. While this practice impacts progression, particularly in the first year, thereafter those who graduate are undistinguished from graduates of conventional DCU programmes. They have been conferred with a

qualification that is recognised in the same way as any degree qualification from DCU. As a result they have found themselves as graduates, in a more privileged position in society. Since the majority of the distance graduates hailed from working class backgrounds, the net result is redistribution rather than reproduction of academic capital.

Bourdieu's research was conducted many decades ago, pre-dating the globalisation and digitisation of higher education. It is unlikely he could have predicted, for example, the ubiquitous nature of online learning or the potential of digital technology to transform the delivery of learning by HE providers. Bourdieu's arguments were developed amid a stable relationship between HE, society and state (Naidoo, 2004). Universities were insulated from market pressures (Marginson & Considine, 2000); assured of state funding yet independent from 'political and corporate influence' (Naidoo 2004 p. 469). While this position has slowly disintegrated, institutions nevertheless continue to depend on state funding. The European University Association states that public funding represents 50% - 90% of universities' income (Estermann et al. 2013). State funding is regularly linked to addressing the issue of social disadvantage.

However, continued emphasis by the state on funding predominantly full-time provision in order to address access issues is problematic, particularly when we consider that part-time flexible higher education learning options exist, are ripe for exploitation and are preferred by under-represented groups. The current system of full-time university education has been dominant for many decades and this predictability lends it an air of normality and permanence. Yet, as a system it has not lead to educational equality. According to Drudy (2009 p.48) 'the issue of educational inequality remains intractable in spite of a range of Government policies designed to combat educational disadvantage'. While governments can intervene financially to help level the playing field, it has proven more difficult to intervene in the totality of structures which make up habitus. It is important to disaggregate current patterns of HE participation with a view to understanding them. The continued existence of full-time HE as the dominant delivery format must at least be questioned.

Bourdieu's theoretical tools make a significant contribution to our understanding of habitus driven action and field driven practice. They assist us in understanding the contemporary issue of inequality. This in turn affords us an opportunity for critical engagement with social theory.

In acknowledgement of Bourdieu, the field of HE can be a place of critical reflection on the status of society and at the same time a space of innovation to enhance access.

### 6.3 Contribution

This thesis makes a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge on part-time distance university graduates. This contribution is made on a number of fronts.

Firstly, the case data demonstrates that employability is a complex *internal* process of negotiation whereby the graduate must convince themselves of the value of their achievement and its worth in the labour market. This contrasts with the prevailing view of employability as an *external* process of negotiation which takes place ‘over time and in interaction with others’ (Holmes 2013, p. 548).

The literature closely associates employability with graduate identity (Holmes 2013) but provides largely descriptive accounts of what identity is (Bridgstock 2009; Henkel 2005; Jackson 2013; Nicholson et al. 2013; Reid et al. 2008). Findings from this case study reveal that building a graduate identity is also an internal process and relates to a belief in one’s *capacity to successfully belong* to a particular group.

This thesis makes a contribution to academic discourse on Bourdieu’s theories and their application. Bourdieu (1979, p. 104/5) contends that in terms of scholastic age and in relation to educational capital, ‘lost years are a step towards relegation or elimination’. The graduates in this study appear more likely to have been positively ‘distinguished’ rather than ‘eliminated’ by their completion of a part-time university degree as mature adults. This thesis promotes a position on HE access which accommodates the life world of working class people, namely part-time, flexible study options. This approach contributes to the academic discourse on Bourdieu through critical engagement with his theories. The data collected in this study provides an insider view from the part-time graduates’ perspective indicating how problematic accessing full-time participation can be, and how part-time provision can facilitate access. Despite their protracted participation participants in this DCU study have been conferred with a qualification that is recognised in the same way as any degree qualification from DCU. As a result they have found themselves as graduates, in a more privileged position in society. For Bourdieu, education is a social institution where particular forms of capital are valued, and

advantage is reproduced. However, as the graduates in this study primarily hailed from working class backgrounds, the net result has been redistribution rather than reproduction of academic capital.

The data from this study provides new empirical evidence on the profile of distance graduates in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The literature identifies how adults have *delayed* their participation in HE for reasons related to social class (Brine and Waller 2004; Chesters and Watson 2014; Croxford and Raffe 2014). The evidence from this case study is that adults have not necessarily delayed their participation. Instead their participation has often been part-time, incremental and *protracted* since leaving school. This has led to the proposal within this study of a potentially new conceptualization of the part-time student as one who has already been in HE and wants to deepen their access through part-time study.

While previous research on part-time students indicates that they would have preferred to study full-time (Butcher 2015), the graduates from this case study indicate a clear preference for part-time study. This is important as the policy around broadening access to HE is almost exclusively focused on full-time course provision. This case study posits that under-represented groups are likely to favour part-time HE options, and that without part-time HE, significant progress in widening participation is improbable.

No study has explored the experience of part-time distance graduates in an Irish context.

Limitations of the study have been outlined in the methodology chapter.

## **6.4 Recommendations**

### **6.4.1 Recommendations for practice**

Seek out and implement strategies to support part-time distance learners progressing through their studies with the same group, to help build social networks and overcome isolation.

Recognize and value the role of work based learning for part-time students to the extent that it is credit bearing in a manner similar to the value given to work placements for full-time students.

Endeavour to ensure that policies and standards accommodate diversity and help ensure equitable (i.e. fair) rather than simply equal (i.e. the same) treatment.

Endeavour to ensure part-time distance students receive advice in relation to career planning including career choice but also recruitment and selection processes for external and in-house candidates.

When employing staff to work with part-time students, all other things being equal, preference those who have themselves been non-traditional students.

### **6.4.2 Recommendations for policy makers**

Policy-makers must acknowledge the body of evidence confirming that students from under-represented groups often favour part-time study. Institutions need to be incentivised to provide part-time/flexible study options.

A policy which supports earlier participation in part-time/distance learning may better support persistence and subsequent labour market outcomes.

The inequitable availability of subject offerings for part-time students needs to be addressed.

The introduction of appropriate official instruments to gather equal access data on part-time students is important. It would seem imperative that this data is gathered and published for all entrants to, and graduates from, HE in order to truly establish the role of different modes of HE in broadening and deepening access.

The provision of coordinated public information and guidance together with an 'accessible, coordinated application system' (HEA 2012, p. 5) should be made available to school leavers and others who might want to apply for part-time courses.

#### **6.4.3 Recommendations for employers**

Support part-time course provision, through contributing financially, as part of a corporate social responsibility agenda, to the education of employees who do not have, but want to attain a part-time/ distance university degree.

Endeavour to ensure that within their employees there is a mixture of those who have studied full-time and part-time; a likely more socially diverse mix. This would help ensure the professional workforce more accurately represents societal diversity.

#### **6.4.4 Recommendations for future research**

An investigation into the part a shared social class habitus between student and teacher plays in motivating under-represented students might represent fruitful ground for further research.

Research which further examines the impact of government incentivised labour market activation schemes (e.g. Springboard) on both broadening access and labour market, or other, advantage, would usefully extent this debate.

## 6.5 Final reflection

While a narrative of disadvantage often surrounds distance education, the graduates in this study are not victims. They are primarily in full-time employment and contribute to the economy and society in which they live. In the final analysis, this is mostly a good news story. It is important therefore to end on a positive note and one that is indicative of the overall view of most graduates:

*Doing this degree was one of the best things I have ever done and graduation was one of my proudest moments (Female Y)*



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## Appendix A: Versions of Open Education Application Forms (starting with most recent)

### Open Education Application Form 2016

\* question MUST be answered ( \*\* question must be answered by Irish Nationals)

Surname \*:

First Names \*:

Married Name (if applicable):

Surname:

First Names:

Date of Birth \*:  /  /

Gender \*: ☐ Male ☐ Female

Medical  
Condition/Disability \*: ☐ Yes ☐ No (If you answered yes click [?](#))

if yes, please state  
condition:

Correspondance  
Address \*: ☒ Ireland ☐ Other Country

Select City or County...

Main Contact  
Number \*:

Mobile Telephone:

Work Phone:

(Enter International  
Agent's details if  
applicable) [?](#)

International  
Agent's name:

International  
Agent's e-mail  
address:

Confirm  
International  
Agent's e-mail:

Country of  
Nationality \*:

PPS Number \*\*: 

Country of Birth \*:

Country of  
Residence \*:

Most recent  
Educational  
Institution  
Attended \*:

Highest  
qualification at time  
of application: \*\*:

Year of departure  
from the last  
Insitution

attended: \*\*:

Have you ever  
studied in DCU  
before? \*: ☐ Yes ☐ No

DCU Student  
Number  
(if applicable):

English Language Competency: 

\* Is the  
English  
language  
your  
primary  
language? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If No,  
please  
state,

Examining  
Body:

If Other  
please  
specify:

Date of  
Completion:  /  /  dd/mm/yyyy

Score:

Please tick **ONE** of the following categories \* :

1. ☐ I am a national of an EU member state.
  2. ☐ I am a national of an non-EU member state. Click [here](#) for Visa information.
- 

How did you hear about us? \* :

- ☐ Today FM ☐ Newstalk ☐ Yahoo Web search ☐ Google Web Search ☐ Bing Web Search
- ☐ Irish Independent ☐ Word of Mouth ☐ Rail or Bus Stop Ads ☐ Metro Herald ☐ Local Radio Stations
- ☐ Digital Ads ☐ Other, please specify:

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** The personal data required and submitted on this form is used to assess your application for courses run by DCU Open Education. The data collected may be used by the University in statistical reporting but only in a manner in which confidentiality will be preserved.

Please tick this box to confirm that you have read this `Confidentiality` note. ☐

# Oscail Application Form 2012-2013

ID Number:

<b>Date Received:</b>	
<b>Programme:</b>	
<b>Reason for (name of programme e.g. BSc)</b>	
<b>Title:</b>	
<b>Firstname:</b>	
<b>Surname:</b>	
<b>Prev DCU Record/Id</b>	
<b>Gender:</b>	
<b>Date of Birth:</b>	
<b>Aged 23 or Over:</b>	
<b>Country of Birth:</b>	
<b>Nationality:</b>	
<b>Country of Residence:</b>	
<b>EU or non EU for Fees</b>	
<b>P.P.S. Number</b>	
<b>Address</b>	
<b>Home Phone</b>	
<b>Work Phone</b>	
<b>Mobile Phone</b>	
<b>Email Address</b>	
<b>Disabilities</b>	
<b>How did you hear about us</b>	

**Exact replica of application form**

# Application form pre 2011

(The contents of this table are exactly as they appeared on the BA application form with the exception of the titles which I have emboldened to make them easier to identify.)

Course	
Single Moduel or DipBA	
Date of Application	
First Name	
Second Name	
Known Name	
Title	
Gender	
Birth Place	
DOB	
Nationality	
Country of Birth	
EU NON-EU	
Address	
Day Phone	
Evening Phone	
Mobile	
Fax	
Email	
English Language Examining Body	
English Language Completion Date	
English Language Score	
<b>Second Level Qualification</b>	
Year	
Subject (1)	
Level (1)	
Grade (1)	
Subject (2)	
Level (2)	
Grade (2)	
Subject (3)	
Level (3)	
Grade (3)	
Subject (4)	
Level (4)	
Grade (4)	
Subject (5)	
Grade (5)	
Level (5)	
Subject (6)	
Level (6)	
Grade (6)	

Subject (7)	
Level (7)	
Grade (7)	
Subject (8)	
Level (8)	
Grade (8)	
Subject (9)	
Grade (9)	
Level (9)	
<b>University/College (1)</b>	
From (1)	
To (1)	
Qualification (1)	
Conferring Body (1)	
Subjects (1)	
Grade\Class (1)	
University/College (2)	
From (2)	
To (2)	
Qualification (2)	
Conferring Body (2)	
Subjects (2)	
Grade\Class (2)	
University/College (3)	
From (3)	
To (3)	
Qualification (3)	
Conferring Body (3)	
Subjects (3)	
Grade\Class (3)	
<b>Institution (1)</b>	
Joined (1)	
Institution (2)	
Joined (2)	
Institution (3)	
Joined (3)	
<b>Trade (1)</b>	
Subjects (1)	
Trade (2)	
Subjects (2)	
Trade (3)	
Subjects (3)	
<b>Other Education</b>	
Course (1)	
Course Duration (1)	
Course Completed (1)	

Course Year (1)	
Course (2)	
Course Duration (2)	
Course Completed (2)	
Course Year (2)	
Course (3)	
Course Duration (3)	
Course Completed (3)	
Course Year (3)	
<b>Employer</b>	
Position Details	
Position Commenced	
<b>Disabilities</b>	
<b>Taken DistEd Before</b>	
DistEd Course	
DistEd Completed	
<b>Why Applying</b>	
Intro Module Format	
Single Module Format	
Single Module or DipBA	
reason taking BASM	
<b>Study Centre (1)</b>	
Study Centre (2)	
Study Centre (3)	
<b>Heard of Course</b>	
Other heard of course	
<b>Other Useful Information</b>	

**(The section below is possibly a later addition to the application form.)**

Work PC	
Home PC	
Other PC	
No PC	
Internet at Home	
Internet at Work	
Other Internet	
No Internet	



## Appendix B: Graduate Survey

This survey seeks information about those who have completed an Irish university undergraduate degree as part-time off-campus students.

The survey should take no more than 10 minutes to complete.

The information you give will remain confidential and will only be used in the preparation of anonymized reports.

No question is compulsory but please do your best to answer all questions.

If you have any queries regarding the survey please contact [lorraine.delaney@dcu.ie](mailto:lorraine.delaney@dcu.ie)

Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey.

1	<b>What year did you graduate from this distance degree programme?</b>
2	<b>What degree did you complete? (BA/BSc)</b>
3	<b>What is your current age?</b> 18-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 60-69 70-79 80 or over
4	<b>What is your gender? (male/female)</b>
5	<b>What is your nationality? (Irish/Other EU/EEA/Non EU/EEA)</b>
6	<b>What motivated you to choose distance education?</b> (Please indicate the relevance for you of EACH statement) (very irrelevant to very relevant) I wanted/needed to be available for work I had domestic/caring responsibilities I had a condition (physical/mental/medical) which made attendance at a college difficult I lived a long way from a third level institution I lived outside Ireland I wanted to be in charge of my own time management Other
7	<b>How important were the following reasons to you in choosing the University?</b> (Please indicate the importance for you of EACH statement) (very unimportant to very important) The University is Irish The degree does not state 'distance education' There is a physical campus The University has a good academic reputation The course I wanted was available here Recommended by others Recommended by my employer There were no entry qualifications required The course was more affordable than other distance/part-time options Other

8	<p><b>How important were the following reasons for you in doing a degree?</b></p> <p>To gain the award i.e. the degree</p> <p>To enhance my employability (employability relates to getting a job or getting promoted in your existing job)</p> <p>Interest in the subject</p> <p>To make up for missed educational opportunities</p> <p>To challenge myself intellectually</p> <p>To set an example for my children</p> <p>To meet new people</p> <p>Other</p>
9	<p><b>How relevant were the following factors in helping you to successfully complete this degree?</b></p> <p>Support from my family</p> <p>Support from my employer</p> <p>Support from other students</p> <p>Support from university staff</p> <p>Other</p>
10	<p><b>How relevant were the following factors to you during your studies?</b></p> <p>I found the time demands of my job caused difficulties for my studies</p> <p>I found family demands caused difficulties for my studies</p> <p>The time demands of the course caused difficulties for me</p> <p>The costs of the course caused difficulties for me</p> <p>I felt isolated during my studies</p> <p>I felt unsupported by the university</p> <p>The technology used caused difficulties</p> <p>Other</p>
11	<p><b>Please state your level of agreement with the following statements:</b></p> <p>I felt comfortable with the other students on this course</p> <p>This course helped me become more open to new ideas</p> <p>This course helped me become more solution-oriented</p> <p>This course helped me communicate my ideas effectively</p> <p>This course increased my confidence</p> <p>This course improved my employability (ability to get a job, keep a job or get promoted)</p> <p>This course helped me make contacts in relation to employment</p> <p>I made good friends on this course</p> <p>Given my circumstances I could not have completed a degree any other way</p> <p>I would recommend this course to a friend</p> <p>I would complete further study by distance education</p> <p>Other</p>
12	<p><b>Where were you living for the majority of the time you were studying for this degree?</b></p> <p>(Please complete one option only)</p> <p>County (if within Ireland)</p> <p>Country (if outside Ireland)</p>
13	<p><b>During most of your participation in this course did you have others who were financially dependent on you?</b></p> <p>Yes</p> <p>No</p>

14	<p><b>Which of the following best describes your main current situation?</b> (Select more than one as necessary)</p> <p>In full-time paid employment In part-time paid employment Self-employed with paid employees Self-employed without paid employees Unemployed Seeking full-time paid employment Seeking part-time paid employment Undertaking further full-time study Undertaking further part-time study Not available for employment Home duties Retired In voluntary/unpaid employment</p>
15	<p><b>The following categories are used by the Central Statistics Office (CSO). Please indicate the category to which your parent(s)/guardian(s) belonged at the time when <u>you</u> left school.</b> (data requested for father/guardian, mother/guardian)</p> <p>Employee Self-employed with paid employees Self-employed without paid employees Unemployed Home duties Retired Deceased Other</p>
16	<p><b>Please provide the employment group for each individual employed outside the home.</b> <b>In the case of your parents/guardians, please indicate their employment group at the time when <u>you</u> left school.</b> (Data collected for: Yourself/father guardian/mother guardian)</p> <p>Employer /Manager Professional Non manual Skilled manual Semi or unskilled manual Farmer 200 acres or more Farmer less than 200 acres</p>
17	<p><b>Please indicate the highest education level attained in FULL-TIME education for each individual listed.</b> In your case this relates to full-time courses you completed prior to this degree. In the case of your parents/guardians please indicate their level of education at the time when you left school. (data requested for self/father guardian/mother guardian)</p> <p>Primary (or no formal education) Lower secondary (Inter/Junior cert) Upper secondary (Leaving cert) Level 6 (advanced cert) Level 7 (diploma/ordinary degree) Level 8 (honours degree) or higher</p>

18	<b>Please select the primary fee payer for this course.</b> (Tick one box only) Irish state funding (e.g. Springboard/LMAS) Other state funding Employer Family/friends Self Other
19	<b>Did you use the university Careers Service for career/employment advice?</b> Yes No
20	<b>Is there anything else you would like to add?</b>
21	<b>If you wish to stay in contact with the university and receive information about future alumni events please enter your name and contact details.</b>

Thank you for completing this survey. To finish, please click 'Done' below.

## Appendix C: Employability Survey

This survey seeks information about the impact of completing a part-time distance Irish university undergraduate degree on the employability of graduates. Employability relates to your ability to get a job or get promoted in your existing job.

Please complete this survey whether or not you are in paid employment as your views are important.

The survey should take no more than 10 minutes to complete.

The information you give will remain confidential and will only be used in the preparation of anonymized reports.

No question is compulsory but please do your best to answer all questions.

If you have any queries regarding the survey please contact [lorraine.delaney@dcu.ie](mailto:lorraine.delaney@dcu.ie)

Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey.

1	<b>What year did you graduate from this distance degree programme?</b>
2	<b>What degree did you complete? (BA/BSc)</b>
3	<b>What is your current age?</b> 18-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 60-69 70-79 80 or over
4	<b>What is your gender? (male/female)</b>
5	<b>What is your nationality? (Irish/Other EU/EEA/Non EU/EEA)</b>
6	<b>What is the name of your current employer?</b>
7	<b>What is your current job title</b>
8	<b>If you are working outside Ireland what influenced your decision to do this?</b> (tick each box that applies) Job only available outside Ireland Wanted to work abroad Salary Better experience Improve long term career prospects To be with partner Not applicable to me Other

9	<p><b>In your view how important are the following factors in relation to your employability?</b>  <b>(Employability refers to getting a job/work or getting promoted in your existing job.)</b></p> <p>Please indicate the importance for you of EACH statement.</p> <p>Having a degree  The level of that degree (i.e. level 7, 8, 9)  The classification of that degree (i.e. first class honours etc.)  The college you attended  The subject you studied  How recently you studied  Your work experience  Your age  Your social class  Your gender  Your ethnic background  Who you know  Your social/communication skills  Your family responsibilities (e.g whether you have children etc.)  Other</p>
10	<p><b>If you are currently employed how long have you been working with your current employer?</b>  <b>(If you are self-employed how long have you been in your current employment?)</b></p> <p>Less than 1 year  1-5 years  6-10 years  11-15 years  16-20 years  More than 20 years</p>
11	<p><b>What are your gross earnings per annum?</b></p> <p>Less than €25,000  €25,000-€45,000  €45,001-€65,000  €65,001-€85,000  More than €85,000</p>
12	<p><b>Where would you be prepared to accept a job/promotion (please tick each box that applies to you)?</b></p> <p>In your home county  In other parts of Ireland  In the UK  In another European country  Outside Europe</p>

13	<p><b>Thinking about your current job, how strongly do you agree with the following statements?</b></p> <p>A degree is a formal requirement for the job I currently do</p> <p>I use the knowledge and/or skills acquired in my degree in my current job</p> <p>My job meets my career aspirations</p> <p>I currently do the same job I did when I started this degree</p> <p>My salary is competitive</p> <p>My job provides me with opportunities for career progression</p> <p>I am satisfied with the hours I work</p> <p>My job is secure</p> <p>My work colleagues support my career development</p> <p>Other</p>
14	<b>Is there anything else you would like to add?</b>
15	<b>If you wish to stay in contact with the university and receive information about future alumni events please enter your name and contact details.</b>

**Thank you for completing this survey. To finish, please click 'Done' below.**

## Appendix D: Draft Interview Schedule

Date of interview .....  
Time of interview .....  
Place of interview .....  
Graduate's name .....

### **Introductory statement**

Thank you for giving up your time for this interview. Your help in this research is much appreciated.

The answers you provide will be confidential. In the work that results from this research individuals will not be identified by name.

There are no right or wrong answers. I am simply interested in how you came to distance education, your experience of being a student and how you have got on since you graduated.

I will record the interview as this will cut down the time the interview takes and will also ensure I have an accurate record of what you say. I hope that is OK?

### **Graduate's background**

Could you tell me a bit about your educational background?

Start with experience of secondary school

Education/occupation of parents/family

What friends had done

College - University (focus on options, choices, etc. at end of second level)

### **What propelled you back to education?**

Talk about jobs/work experience up to that point

### **Participation experience**

Comfort with other students/staff

What supported your participation?

What obstacles did you face?

Feeling part of the university

What sources of advice did you use? (formal/informal)

### **Graduate's current situation and labour market experience**

What have you been doing since you graduated?

Has your job/employment expectations changed?

If yes, how have you experienced that change?

If no, why do you think not?

Establish extent to which they use the degree/extent to which they are in graduate level employment

Do you disclose mode of delivery in cv/interview/LinkedIn

Do you think you have any advantages or disadvantages compared to other graduates?

Impact of your completion of degree on your family

### **Conclusion**

Any other comments/anything else you would like to add?

Thank-you for giving up your time to be interviewed

Interviewer's notes and comments

Comment on the interviewee's level of interest and manner

Adapted from: Greenbank, P., and Hepworth, S. (2008): Working class students and the career decision-making process: A qualitative stud. A PROP report for HECSU:

[http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/Working\\_class.pdf](http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/Working_class.pdf)



## Appendix E: Profile of Interviewees

Degree	Motive	Pseudonym	Gender	Year Grad.	Degree Class	Age	Prior HE	Subsequent HE level	Location	Nationality	Employment type	Grad Level employment	LinkedIn/ Disclose distance
BA	Career	Margaret	F	2008	2.1	Y	n	9	Leinster	Irish	Public	Y	n
BA	Career	Bernadette	F	2013	2.1	Y	n	9	Dublin	Irish	Charity	Y	n
BA	Interest	James	M	2012	2.1	y	7 (p/t)		Leinster	Irish	Private	Y	n
BA	Career	Dominic	M	2014	2.1	Y	6	9	Munster	Irish	Private	Y	y/y
BA	Career	Julie	F	2012	1	Y	n		Ulster	Irish	Home duties	N	n
BA	Ed.	Breda	F	2007	2.2	M	n		Dublin	Irish	Public	y	n
BA	Ed.	Emer	F	2015	3	Y	n (tu)*		Leinster	Irish	Private	Y	y/y
BA	Interest	Peter	M	2012	1	Y	n (tu)		Dublin	Non-EU	Private	Y	y/y
BA	Career	Ali	F	2001	2.1	M	n	9	Dublin	Irish	Private	Y	y/n
BA	Interest	Mary	F	2008	1	M	n (tu)	10	Dublin	Irish	Public	Y	n
BSc	Career	Leo	M	2012	1	M	6	9	Leinster	Irish	Private	Y	y/n
BSc	Career	Mark	M	2007	1	Y	N		Dublin	Irish	Public	Y	n
BSc	Career	Una	F	2015	1	Y	7 (p/t)		Dublin	Irish	Public	Y	y/n
BSc	Interest	Greg	M	2015	1	M	8 (p/t)	9	Leinster	Irish	Public	Y	y/n
BSc	Career	Eddie	M	2013	2.1	M	6 (p/t)		Dublin	Irish	Public	Y	y/n
BSc	Career	Francy	M	2014	2.1	M	6 (p/t)		Dublin	Irish	Charity	Y	y/n
BSc	Career	Brendan	M	2013	1	M	6		Munster	Irish	Private	Y	n

\*tu=tried full-time university but left during first year.

n=no

p/t= part-time

y=yes

y/n= graduate has a LinkedIn profile but they do not say they studied by distance education

y/y=graduate has a LinkedIn profile which discloses that they studied by distance education

Age: Y= 18-39, M=40-59, O=60+

**Appendix F:** \*First-time new entrants to full-time HE aged 18–20 in the 2011/12 academic year as a percentage of the total number in that age cohort together with percentage of distance graduates (N=268) and distance degree students registered in 2016 (N=507) by geographic location.

Full time new entrants to HE* Dublin		Distance graduates Dublin		Distance Students 2016: Dublin		Full time new entrants to HE* State		Distance Graduates State		Distance Students 2016	
		N	%	N	%			N	%	N	%
Dublin Total	47%	90	34%	208	43%	State total	51.5%	253	95%	480	95%
Dublin County	53%	24	27%	52	25%	Carlow	55%	5	2%	8	2%
Dublin 1	23%	0		6	3%	Cavan	47%	4	1%	7	1%
Dublin 2	26%	1	1%	2	1%	Clare	59%	4	1%	18	4%
Dublin 3	60%	4	4%	8	4%	Cork	58%	27	10%	32	7%
Dublin 4	84%	0		3	1%	Donegal	44%	3	1%	9	2%
Dublin 5	47%	4	4%	12	6%	Dublin	47%	90	34%	208	43%
Dublin 6	99%			5	2%	Galway	60%	12	5%	17	4%
Dublin 6w	82%			2	1%	Kerry	54%	10	4%	7	1%
Dublin 7	41%	2	2%	4	2%	Kildare	47%	15	6%	17	4%
Dublin 8	28%	6	7%	9	4%	Kilkenny	53%	4	1%	10	2%
Dublin 9	55%	7	8%	17	9%	Laois	41%	3	1%	10	2%
Dublin 10	16%					Leitrim	61%			5	1%
Dublin 11	28%	4	4%	13	6%	Limerick	51%	9	3%	8	2%
Dublin 12	37%	3	3%	4	2%	Longford	50%			2	
Dublin 13	36%	4	4%	11	5%	Louth	47%	8	3%	12	2%
Dublin 14	76%	5	6%	3	1%	Mayo	60%			7	1%
Dublin 15	47%	11	12%	19	10%	Meath	49%	15	6%	37	8%
Dublin 16	79%	1	1%	8	4%	Monaghan	58%	1	.5%	5	1%
Dublin 17	15%	2	2%	5	2%	Offaly	45%	5	2%	2	
Dublin 18	58%	1	1%	5	2%	Roscommon	59%	1	.5%	4	1%
Dublin 20	32%	3	3%	3	1%	Sligo	58%				
Dublin 22	26%	2	2%	2	1%	Tipperary	51%	6	2%	8	2%
Dublin24	29%	6	7%	15	7%	Waterford	56%	6	2%	4	1%
						Westmeath	51%	6	2%	8	2%
						Wexford	49%	6	2%	14	3%
						Wicklow	53%	13	5%	21	4%
						Abroad		15	5%	27	5%

## Appendix G: Cross-tabulation of education at entry and attainment of H1 classification in final award

Previous education	H1 class.			Total	
	Per * cent	N		Per cent	N
Lower secondary	23	3		5	13
Upper secondary	25	20		29	79
Level 6	29	19		25	66
Level 7	33	13		15	40
Level 8	42	5		4	12
Level 9	57	4		3	7
Missing	23	12		19	51
Total	28	76		100	268

## Appendix H: Cross-tabulation of socio-economic status of graduates

	Employment status	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	%	N
1	In full-time paid employment	80								5		1			63.5%	80
2	In part-time paid employment		21				1			1		3	1	1	16.7%	21
3	Self-employed with paid employees			2						1					1.6%	2
4	Self-employed without paid employees				3							2			2.4%	3
5	Unemployed					5	1		1	1		2			4.0%	5
6	Seeking full-time paid employment		1			1	6			1		2		1	4.8%	6
7	Seeking part-time paid employment							1				1			.8%	1
8	Undertaking further full-time study					1			2			1			1.6%	2
9	Undertaking further part-time study	5	1	1		1	1			11		3		1	8.7%	11
10	Not available for employment										1		1		.8%	1
11	Home duties	1	3		2	2	2	1	1	3		13		1	10.3%	13
12	Retired		1								1		5		4.0%	5
13	In voluntary/unpaid employment		1				1			1		1		3	2.4%	3
	Total															126

## Appendix I: Reasons why graduates were working abroad

	Respondent										Cited
Reason	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Job only available outside Ireland	x	x	x			x		x			5
Wanted to work abroad			x				x				2
Salary			x	x	x						3
Better experience			x		x	x					3
Improve career prospects		x	x		x						3
To be with partner											0
To return home										x	1
Religious calling									x		1
Total respondents											10