Widening Participation, Study Progress, Retention and Student Support

Widening Participation in Distance Education: Challenges from an Irish case study.

While participation in higher education (HE) has increased dramatically in recent years, inequalities persist for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in terms of course level, field of study and institutional status (Smyth 2018). This case study, from Dublin City University (DCU), explores the socio-economic background and HE access experience of a group (n=268) of graduates who completed a level 8 degree through distance education. Mixed methods of data collection are employed including an analysis of institutional documents, an online survey (126 respondents) and 17 semi-structured interviews. This topic is important as we know little about part-time students (Butcher 2015; Hunt 2017). The study raises some interesting considerations for distance education providers.

The graduates, primarily from a working class background, were clear they wanted to enter the labour market as soon as possible after leaving school and be financially independent. Yet they struggled to find information on flexible/online/part-time study options. HE providers target this market primarily with full-time courses, as full-time provision is the focus of government funding (HEA 2022). School leavers tend to represent the biggest market for higher education in any country, yet distance education providers traditionally do not target school leavers, largely because it is seen as the domain of conventional place-based universities.

A large percentage (49%) of the graduates had chosen DCU, as they did not want it immediately obvious that they had studied by distance education. While flagging a university as 'Open' may not be important to some applicants, the evidence from this case at least is that it is important to others. The students in this study wanted to disclose the mode of delivery if, and when, they choose.

Graduates in this study were primarily (64%) from a lower socio-economic background. However, they did not see themselves as disadvantaged. They appeared unaware of societal structures and saw their difficulties in completing HE as legitimate when coming from a background like theirs. They saw their parents and themselves as generally hardworking and ambitious, and sought ways to improve their life chances through education (Reay 2017). Although society's structures can cause privilege and disadvantage to be reproduced in a manner that appears legitimate (Bourdieu 1977), few want to be labelled *disadvantaged* or attend a *University for the Disadvantaged*. Perhaps a move away from the deficit-based language around distance education is timely.

There are limitations with this study. The qualitative data is self-reported. Additionally, as with all case studies, the results are bound to one particular institution. The approach is interpretative and is characterised by this feature. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the study deals with a survivor sample; graduates. The experience of those who did not complete may be very different. Nevertheless, how graduates interpret their experiences is revealing.

This research has the potential to help us understand and address declining numbers in online distance education in a way that may benefit society and pursue the equity cause as a core value (Skillbeck 2000).

Keywords: distance education; graduates; disadvantage

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