Was it worth it? The social, personal and economic returns of a third level education to mature students. A case study of Trinity graduates.

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INTRODUCTION

Adult education has been identified as being of primary importance in redressing power imbalance, enabling social mobility and affording people opportunities that they could not otherwise have accessed (Lisbon European Council 2000). Council Resolution 2002 (cited in Communication from the Commission 2006) highlights the fact that Europe has an aging population and that most future employment would be highly skilled to the extent that 50% of jobs would require some form of tertiary qualifications. Given that approximately 72 million Europeans are engaged in low skilled work it follows that focus was needed in getting older people 'up skilled', thus third level institutions have been encouraged to include mature individuals in the lexicon of disadvantage and financially facilitated to accommodate them in gaining access to a third level education. This spotlight on credentialisation has altered the notion of education from being an intellectually enriching voyage into a market driven commodification of learning nested within a bureaucratised system of economic imperatives. Education is an industry worth $2trillion globally and the focus on education has been on servicing economies rather than appreciation of its' social and personal development role:

‘the view that education is simply another market commodity has become normalised in policy and public discourses’ (Lynch:298 in Healy, Reynolds & Collins, 2006)

Within the Irish domain, university fees were abolished in 1995. The National Plan (2008) had targets of mature students accounting for 20% of full time entrants into education by 2013. Trinity College has committed in its' Strategic Plan 2009-2014, to increasing the representation of underrepresented groups to 22% and underrepresented economic groups to 13% on the condition that financial
commitments in the National Plans are honoured. Given Ireland’s present financial situation those considerations might be in flux. Mature students are a small but visible feature of life in Irish third level institutions. Yet if the results of gaining a degree were measured purely in economic and career orientated terms, it could not be said that mature students felt that they enjoyed the same rewards as their younger traditional counterparts (Fleming et al., 2009, Ryan 2004, Staunton 2008) which resonates with experiences reported in the UK (Egerton 2000, Adnett & Coates 2000, Purcell, Wilton & Elias 2007. Woodfield 2007, Woodfield 2010).

Therefore, if education is not facilitating an adult individual’s financial wellbeing by equipping them to take their equal place in the marketplace, yet mature individuals are predominately happy to have gone to third level, this (aside from highlighting a policy and orientation mismatch) poses the question at the heart of the conference; how exactly does education contribute to a sense of wellbeing?

METHODOLOGY

The definition of mature student was that used by the HEA (Higher Education Authority) of being 23 years old or more when commencing the first year of study. The theoretical work of Earl Hopper on social mobility (1971, 1973, 1981) informed the initial design of this study and provided a framework for developing research questions as to usefulness of education in facilitating change in a mature individual’s life at a non normative stage in the life cycle. The usefulness of his approach is in not confining social mobility to merely class movement but rather to “gaining the opportunity to acquire skills and qualities that they will need in their adult positions” (Hopper, 1981:153) and also his attempts to separate the concepts of status and class. This qualitative study was administered in two phases. The function of the first phase was to design, recruit and conduct focus groups in order to ascertain, reflect and identify issues of importance to mature graduates. Therefore, the criterion for inclusion was to have been awarded a primary degree as a mature individual. Purposive and opportunistic sampling was used to recruit participants for three focus groups. Data was taped, transcribed, coded and analysed and used to identify key themes which formed the basis for designing a topic guide for phase two. The second phase is ongoing and consists of a series of personal interviews based on
the themes uncovered by the focus group sessions. As part of the original focus of the research was to examine the effect of attendance at an elite university, the criterion for inclusion was to have enrolled at Trinity College during the years 1995-2005. Participants were randomly selected from a list of former mature graduates made available by the student records office of Trinity College Dublin, with due diligence being paid to the Data Protection Act 1988. Thus far fifteen interviews have been conducted. These in-depth interviews offered the opportunity to offer new insight into accepted concepts (Rubin & Rubin 2005).

RESULTS

The first phase of this study is complete. Three focus groups have been held. Evidence based interpretation has resulted in the identification of the following themes: Historical, Decision process, Transformative, Personal Returns, Social Support, College Experience, Status effects, Post College Experience. These have been presented through the prisms of social, personal and economic returns for the individual, of a graduate education. Findings were used to develop a topic guide for the second phase. This phase of the study is ongoing and involves personal interviews with mature graduates and early findings are presented here.

Focus Groups
Policies, legislation, quotas and incentives are some of the situational factors that facilitated a return to education. For those who had been beneficiaries of the ‘free fees’ schemes (fifteen out of twenty participants), only one participant said that he would have attended college if he had been required to pay fees. However, five participants had attended university in the 1980’s and all had paid fees. Four of these participants had been in their twenties and had to work whilst pursuing their degrees, one individual had been home based before returning to education in her thirties. It is suggested that structural norms have a defining impact on the mindset and agency of the individual. Aspirations have been fairly consistent between the groups and have included; to better oneself, to improve employment opportunities, fulfil a lifelong ambition, expand knowledge, meet like minded people, pursue a different career path, prove they could do it, increase confidence, gain a qualification.
Economic, Social and Personal Returns.
Employment varied and included cleaning, journalism, administration and research. Of the ‘free fees’ cohort only one was happy with employment and remuneration. There was concern expressed over employment prospects within one’s field and also with regard to credentialisation.

“I went to UCD to do a degree in botany and when I finished that I couldn’t get a job anywhere so I was offered two PhD’s in Trinity and one in UCD and in the end I choose the one in UCD so I just finished there a few weeks ago........ so I’m unemployed once again I can’t think of anything else to do “ (Catherine).

“workers have degrees and masters and we’re paid an awful lot less we’re not valued we’re not necessary to the company and trying to get a rise would be impossible” (Nadia).

Some felt there was a high social cost in coming to college with a large number talking of times when they were accused of ‘getting above themselves’, whilst others talked of widening familial and community perspectives. Some felt that they fitted in well in college whereas others encountered some difficulty.

“You know a lot of the kids ...........were not necessarily from a privileged background. They were from the exact same town as me the town .... the main activity was as a boy most worked at (local factory) very few went to university....... but I expected people to be wearing funny clothes”.” (Max)

“I didn't actually expect it to be anything but over the four years while I was there. I could see a lot of stuff that you won’t say there is a whole stream of operations going on here that I am not part off and I don't want to be part of were you there the night when we were going into the *** and the fella coming out said ‘they’ll let any old scum into Trinity nowadays” (Racquel)

From a personal perspective, all were glad that they had gone to college. Most felt that their intellectual engagement with activities/pursuits was of a better quality as a result of their education. One individual was frustrated by the ‘middle class academic agenda’ pursued in third level but nevertheless was very glad to have undertaken the education. Some spoke of increased levels of confidence which would have been exhibited in their interactions with professionals and with friends and family. Others spoke of the personal cost having experienced a decrease in confidence, mainly as a result of their employment situation. There was also a feeling of anticlimax noted
as a result of leaving the college community and the lack of engagement with like-minded thinkers:

“I mean there was a joy in it I loved learning and understanding things like all the plays I would have gone to and not had a clue what they were about like it gave me a framework to understand what they were in which I was living and to think about things in a more critical way and in some ways that destroyed my innocence and experience and that whole you know what i mean it was a very conflicting experience but it was fantastic it made me feel just so alive” (Aoife).

Personal Interviews
This is an ongoing phase with themes evolving as interviews are coded and new interviews taking place. Thus far of the fifteen, two paid fees, the remainder being facilitated by policies and quotas. Participants came from Arts and Humanities and the Health Science faculties. None spoke of regretting the journey. Contrary to the focus group participants, five would have paid fees and taken a loan to do so. Six had completed further degrees and diplomas, one becoming a GP, two pursuing PhD’s, two were in ill health and two were unemployed and looking for work. Eleven were employed and were content with their financial returns, even if that entailed a drop in salary:

“the (semi state firm) was well paid and my money would have far exceeded that now if I had stayed you know with no promotion” (Fianna).

The social benefits were highly regarded. One interviewee worked in an administrative position organising extra mural courses within a university and was highly committed to encouraging others of all ages and walks of life to engage in education:

“I have a 93 year old man coming to college and he has been coming for three years and he absolutely loves it” (Tash).

For this cohort the aims in coming included improving work prospects, intellectual growth, to provide emotional succour, to set a good example to family and to achieve balance in life. Age, accent and habits were discussed and are emerging as symbols of status for this cohort. All the participants were happy to have come back to education, regardless of the financial returns. The majority did not see their visible signs of age acting as a deterrent to group membership of the university body:
I mixed with my classmates 18, 19 years olds and I was invited to all their twenty firsts” (Gareth)

“the only time they would have acknowledged that I was older was when they would chat to me about boyfriend troubles and that” (Kate)

A key theme emerging is the transformatory nature of education and this is informing the development of typologies.

**Strategists:** Some were very deliberate in planning to go into education, strategising and structuring their collegiate journey to maximise achieving preset goals.

**Fulfilment seekers:** Some had a sense of something missing in life and engaged in education to satisfy a need for knowledge and intellectual growth.

**Transformationalists:** Some were unhappy with life and availed of opportunity as it presented itself, the goal being to distance themselves from circumstance, and embark on a hierarchy of opportunity.

The adult learner is layering his/her identity whilst at university. They may or may not have family roles as parents or partners, they may or may not have work commitments but they have amassed and continue to amass a myriad of life experiences which colour their journey through university and can serve as example:

“ I developed a role model for the family as to what actually needs to happen to get yourself established” (Ray)

Stage models of development (Piaget, Erikson and Vygotsky) focus on chronological age, concentrating heavily on the early development. Schuller (in Tuijnman & Van der Kamp, 1992) suggests we should consider development within the context of the life span, in this manner taking into account how social circumstances could lead to a shift in boundaries which open up erstwhile unavailable opportunities and allows consideration of the individual at a collective level. This gives an opportunity both to learn and to ‘unlearn’, both for the institution and the individual and in doing so facilitates education in contributing to well being.

Trinity College has the reputation of an elite institution and despite entry being based on a points system, many students are drawn from affluent classes. Whereas the status of age did not appear to have a negative impact on the college experience and thus on an individual’s well being, social background, on occasion, was noted as a differential within the student body both by staff and fellow younger students. This was most often manifested by accents
Tara spoke of an incident early on in her first year in college:

"the first lecture I did in sociology I was asked everyone in the class was asked em what class were we from I was like relevance the chap was Greek so I said to my friend who was in her 40’s and also from a working class background I said this’ll be good so eh the kids were introducing themselves as being from middle class higher class how did you come in here under what guise straight from boarding school that kind of a thing and I said I had come in I was working class straight in then no reason no reaction and he said oh right how did you come in here I said I just hopped off the 27 bus 20 minutes ago…"

the tutor’s reply: “how interested he was that there were working class people coming in through Trinity College”

The study body present did not have any comment on that save one – “kid who turned around and said to me that he had met working class people before they worked for his father”

Tara never modified her accent and went on to become very good friends with that young student; she got a good degree and became a successful teacher. Tara had good and bad things to say about her journey through university. From her perspective, her well being was enhanced in being able to maintain her identity as a working class woman, whilst benefiting financially from being a salaried teacher, socially from promoting education in her community and politically in engaging as a community activist. She was proud of her identity as a working class Dublin woman and added the identity of a student/graduate onto it rather than changing aspects of herself.

CONCLUSION

Education is not necessarily an easy passage for mature students. Some had to take time off books to manage the complexities of life and its intersection with their role as students. Some noted the ease with which younger students could study, having been inoculated in the strategies of scholastic endeavour through schooling. Others spoke of strain in personal relationships. However, all were driven for a myriad of reasons from happenstance to unrequited ambition, to engage in and to complete their courses and all, to varying degrees, were glad that they had done so, even if
their goals hadn’t been realised. Therefore it is suggested that well being does not always equate with happiness, rather well being could be regarded as the ability to experience transformations throughout the life course.

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