

Theme: *Meeting the Challenges of Lifelong Learning: Policy, Institutional and Personal*

Title: Social Welfare dependent mature students; Insights into their lived experience as full-time higher education students

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During a period of severe economic crisis that saw unemployment peak at 15.2% in 2012, the Irish State embarked on a reform strategy that included increased spending on Working Age Employment Support schemes. As a result, spending tripled on second-chance education support provided through the Department of Social Protection 'Back to Education Allowance' (BTEA). Notwithstanding this, BTEA, as an employment activation initiative largely measured against employment targets and the unemployment live register, has been found to be ineffective in meeting its employment objectives. However, by themselves, quantitative metrics do not tell the whole story and it is difficult to understand or conceptualise findings outside their contexts.

This study draws from the lived, personal experience of ten, self-selected, mature students who received the BTEA while undertaking full-time undergraduate degree programmes in an Irish university. As long-term Social Welfare recipients, they are a unique sub-set of the full-time mature-student population. Within this sub-set the data highlights diversity and uniqueness in how individual social-welfare dependent mature students understand their own circumstance before, during and beyond their engagement in higher education. While they process ostensibly similar life events, like financial vulnerability, long-term unemployment and parenting, they do not necessarily experience such seemingly similar events in the same way. Therefore individual motives for engaging in higher education were found to be diverse, as their journey back into employment is often influenced by uncomfortable, and sometimes distressing, life-events that shape perspectives and decisions. This qualitative study provides insights into the essence of their experience, as it gives voice to respondents' personal histories, studentship experience and aspirations.

Adopting a phenomenological approach (Creswell, et al., 2007), autobiographical narratives were used to explore key factors that impacted on the decision to enrol in full-time higher

education, the subsequent studentship experience, and the effect on this particular sub-set of the mature student population. The main theoretical underpinnings are transformative change (Mezirow, 2006) in the context of second-chance education and improving life-chances. Using a transformative learning (Taylor, 2008) lens, this research developed a sense of the different positions; including that of people moving from earlier situations of apparent marginalisation or crisis through less comfortable developmental states, and that of competitiveness and economic metrics, which appear to tell a different story. The research explores key factors that impact on long-term Social Welfare dependent mature students in full-time higher education, and gains insight into their world.

The findings show that intrinsic elements, often framed within a process of understanding, and reflecting on individual identity, life trajectory and personal fulfilment, emerged as key factors in mature students' decision to engage in second-chance education. Attempts to shake off earlier school experience and negative family influence, or disassociate from life-trajectories that no longer make sense, suggests a sense of dissatisfaction with existing meaning structures. Although employability also featured in their decisions, it was in the context of more fulfilling and intrinsically rewarding work. Thus, the way employment is perceived challenges initiatives to activate people into the labour market and break away from Social Welfare dependence. Overall, Social Welfare dependent mature students were found to experience a mixture of hardship, transformation, empowerment and self-belief, while demonstrating an ability to act strategically to realise both intrinsic and extrinsic ambitions.

References:

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