



DIALOGUE – Bridges between Research and Practice in ULLL

NATIONAL REPORT

Group 1: Access and Progression

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Reflective Overview

Lifelong learning has been an enormously influential policy idea in Ireland since the mid 1990s. The prevalent concept of lifelong learning is largely derived from international and European models which link economic growth with social cohesion through the idea of upgrading and 'upskilling' the stock of human capital. From a lifelong learning perspective the influence of social background and age on participation and attainment levels have emerged as very important issues in Ireland. The emergence of lifelong learning discourse has changed the role of adult education in Irish society. LLL has also been linked to reforms of Irish Higher Education. In an Irish context ULL is primarily understood as the desire to move towards **1) greater systemic integration and institutional flexibility** and **2) to address inequality** in a way which also meets the needs of a modern market economy. Research suggests that both of these things have occurred but that systemic inequality still exists.

Research on LL and ULL has been driven by large institutional sponsors with the result that LL has become more visible within an educational system which is now more integrated and subject to targets linked to LL and ULL. Some research has questioned the dominant model of LL and ULL but it is difficult to ascertain the impact this has had on policy or practice.

Systemic issues particularly around funding and grants remains an obstacle to the development of access and widening participation. In an Irish context this has had an enormous impact on part-time flexible ULL opportunities.

Lifelong learning developed in a period of unprecedented wealth. In recession it is likely that the way access and flexibility are implemented will change.

Our case studies suggest that research has had a marginal and indirect impact on access and lifelong learning initiatives. It thus remains open to question in light of the policy overview and the case studies the extent to which lifelong learning is primarily a discourse which has successfully linked disparate social trends and established practices to a new conception of education rather than functioning as an integrated programme for educational change.

Strengthening the links between academic research and professional practice will provide a space for practitioners to consider their own ongoing research, especially on initiatives such as those outlined in the case studies which have been developing over a number of years in a research vacuum. Such links will also allow for a more informed transfer of learning back to the researchers who inform policy. This dialogue will also facilitate a space to explore the often complex and nuanced relationship between research and policy and pragmatic concerns when a philosophy of adult education and pedagogy gives rise to innovative and flexible responses to inequalities and barriers in specific locales.



An introduction to Lifelong Learning –the Irish context

The following overview is broken into three main sections

1. A broad overview of lifelong learning policy in Ireland.
2. A brief summary of the most important trends in Irish Higher Education giving particular attention to how access has been defined and understood.
3. A general description of the current state of research on lifelong learning and access.

Lifelong Learning in Ireland: A Broad Overview including Facts and Figures

The concept of lifelong learning has enjoyed a good deal of currency in Irish educational policy since the European Year of Lifelong Learning in 1996. In the late 1990s political support gathered behind the idea and a junior ministerial post for adult education was also created in which lifelong learning became a key point of reference for the minister¹. Since then state policies on education drawn up by the Department of Education and Science such as the Green and White Papers on Adult Education (DES, 1998, 2000) and the main tertiary education planning body-the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2008b) have constantly reaffirmed the centrality of lifelong learning to their vision of contemporary education. Lifelong learning has also become a key policy term for the main organisations of adult education in the Republic of Ireland such as Aontas and NALA². This is also true of Pobal the management company tasked with allocating funding for community development projects on behalf of the state and whose activity has a direct bearing on Irish adult education.

So for over a decade the concept of lifelong learning has served as an open and flexible policy term for a number of key institutions in Irish education. As such it has been particularly important in 1) redefining the role of adult education in Irish society and 2) has been closely associated with a series of reforms in the Irish Higher Education aimed at ensuring greater systemic flexibility, widening participation and achieving equality. Inevitably the precise meaning of lifelong learning has been contested and it may be more accurate to speak of competing visions and models of lifelong learning³. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify the most influential and prevalent understanding of lifelong learning as it has and continues to be employed by the Irish state in relation to both adult and tertiary education .

¹ In fact 2007 this post was even given the title of Minister for lifelong learning. The title has been changed earlier this year to the Minister for Training and Skills.

² Respectively the national organisation of adult education <http://www.aontas.com/> and the National Adult Literacy Association (NALA) <http://www.nala.ie/>.

³ Of course this is also the case internationally and as Field (2003) has noted the formation of ideas about lifelong learning as formulated by a variety of transnational bodies such as UNESCO and the OECD over the past forty years has means that lifelong learning has been defined in very different ways.

To do this it is important to note that lifelong learning has featured regularly in *general* social policy as well as educational position papers over the past decade. For example it has featured in key social policy statements including the *National Development Plan 2000-2006* and the *National Development Plan 2007-2013* and the *Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation 2006-2013* and the work of the Future Skills Group 2011 who are responsible for anticipating labour market demands (Government of Ireland, 1999, 2005, 2006; Condon & McNaboe, 2011). The importance of the concept to policy and to state planning is also reflected in the fact that data on participation in lifelong learning is now regularly gathered by the Irish Central Statistics Office.

A banking crisis in 2008 precipitated a deep recession in Ireland and resulted in a change of government in February 2011. This has led to a profound reevaluation of policy priorities but nonetheless the importance of lifelong learning has been reaffirmed in the recent Programme for Government (Government of Ireland, 2011) and in recent press statements from a junior minister of education.

Reviewing the development of the discourse of lifelong learning in Irish education over the past decade and a half it is clear that much of its significance derives from the manner in which it forges links between economic, social and educational policy goals. In other words lifelong learning policy and discourse offers a useful shorthand for imagining society, learning and education in an integrated way. In fact what is probably most noticeable about the use of the term lifelong learning in an Irish context is just how *broad* a range of economic and cultural changes it is meant to address. It is no accident that the lifelong learning agenda has often resulted in cross departmental and cross sectoral cooperation. For instance when the Task Force on lifelong learning was established in 2000 by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment it was done so in conjunction with the Department of Education and Science (see Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2002).

It should be noted that the primary emphasis in policy has been on fostering economic growth, ensuring flexibility and guaranteeing competitiveness. This version of lifelong learning is clearly informed by and is explicitly linked to the 'human capital' model of lifelong learning advocated by the OECD (2004, 2008) and the EU (CEC, 2000, 2001). The key aim of these policies is to 'upskill' the general population in order to provide the foundation for future economic growth. Typically this is linked to varying models of post-industrial development based primarily on information technologies such as the 'knowledge society' or most recently the 'smart economy'⁴.

Importantly adapting to the new flexible knowledge economy is also seen as the most effective way of creating greater levels of opportunity, equality and social inclusion. As a

⁴ For a recent example see the 2008 document [Building Ireland's Smart Economy: A framework for Sustainable Economic Renewal](http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Building_Ireland's_Smart_Economy/Building_Ireland's_Smart_Economy_.pdf). Accessed here 21/10/11
http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Building_Ireland's_Smart_Economy/Building_Ireland's_Smart_Economy_.pdf.

consequence lifelong learning is tasked with achieving an ambitious and complex set of goals and objectives which may or may not be fully commensurable with each other⁵.

The implementation of lifelong learning policy in Ireland has also been clearly informed and spurred on by data gathered nationally and internationally which suggests that there are very uneven patterns of educational attainment within the Irish population. According to figures in the OECD's *Education at a Glance* (2011, p. 38) 35 % of the adult population have completed secondary education or some form of non-tertiary post-secondary education and 36% have completed some form of tertiary education. This is above the EU or the OECD average for tertiary educational attainment (which significantly was not the case two decades ago and reflects the rapid expansion of third level provision in Ireland). However, it is below average for secondary education attainment levels which indicates that there are sharp generational differences in educational achievement in Ireland. This contention is buttressed by research completed in the mid-nineties (Morgan, Hickey, & Kellaghan, 1997) in cooperation with the OECD which highlighted the fact that 55% of adults between the ages of 16 and 64 had very low levels of literacy. This is partially due to the fact that free universal secondary education was only introduced in Ireland in the 1960s which is relatively late in comparison to similarly developed OECD countries⁶.

This type of international research has also underlined that the level of adult participation in lifelong learning which includes informal and non-formal activity has historically been lower in Ireland than comparable countries. A recent European publication which includes an overview of lifelong learning across the EU (Eurostat, 2011 p. 67) suggests that there has been some improvement in the participation levels of adults in formal and non-formal learning in Ireland (from 6.1% of the adult population in 2005 to 6.3% in 2009)⁷. However, this is still low by European standards (9.3% for EU 27).

These figures also need to be disaggregated according to gender, age, geographical location, and especially socio-economic background to really begin to grasp what is at stake. Although the picture is unclear about how gender⁸ affects participation in lifelong learning some other tentative conclusions can be drawn from the available data. The Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2010, p 3) have noted that "participation rates in lifelong learning tended to decrease as age increased with 33% of 25-34 year olds and only 4% of those aged 75 and over having received it"⁹. The CSO also suggests that urban dwellers are more likely avail of lifelong learning than people based in rural areas.

⁵ This will be one of the main arguments made by educational researchers in Ireland and will be explored later in the document.

⁶ This is also obviously linked to the late 'modernisation' of the the Irish economy and the transformation of the occupational structure away from agricultural and manual work towards non-manual, administrative and professional occupations since the 1950s.

⁷ For an alternative set of figures using different methodologies and coming to somewhat different interpretations see the Central Statistics Office (2010) and Condon & McNaboe (2011)

⁸ The Eurostat figures suggest higher level of female participation but the CSO figures suggests greater gender parity in participation rates.



Perhaps most pertinently the figures of CSO suggest that higher levels of previously acquired attainment in formal education is a good predictor of future participation in lifelong learning. The level of previous attainment is in Ireland strongly linked to socio-economic background. This suggests that the demographic 'shortfall' is not the only major challenge facing Irish education and adds to a wide body of quantitative and qualitative research by the state, the think tank the Economic and Social Research Institute, NGOs and independent academics which repeatedly indicates that Irish education continues to be characterised by high levels of social inequality in participation and attainment. The CSO data also indicates that professionals and managers were more likely to have had the opportunity to participate in lifelong learning in the workplace. These demographic and socio-economic gaps are fundamental to understanding the specific challenges and features of the lifelong learning agenda in Ireland.

Summary of Key Points

Lifelong learning is an enormously influential policy idea in Ireland which has attracted the attention of a wide variety of educational institutions and organisations since the mid 1990s. It has been a key idea in state policies which link a complex variety of economic and social goals to education. The prevalent concept of lifelong learning is largely derived from international and European models which link economic growth with social cohesion through the idea of upgrading and upskilling the stock of human capital. This has been linked, although not always in a very detailed way, to broader models of social and technological change.

From a lifelong learning 'perspective' the influence of social background and age on participation and attainment levels have emerged as very important issues. As a perspective which imagines the role of learning across society it has had been useful in terms of trying to re-imagine how the links, pathways and progress routes between community education, further education, higher education and the labour market do, or should, function.

The development of discourse of 'lifelong and lifewide' learning has helped the state to redefine the role of adult education in Irish society. It has also been fundamental to the way a series of reforms of Irish Higher Education aimed have been ensuring greater systemic flexibility, widening participation and achieving equality. Thus in an Irish context ULL is primarily understood as the desire to move towards **1) greater systemic integration and institutional flexibility** and **2) to address inequality** in a way which also meets the needs of a modern market economy.

A Snapshot of the Irish System of Higher Education: Expansion, Change and Durable Inequalities

The vast majority of Irish students in Higher Education attend institutions that are part of the state funded binary higher education system. This is comprised of the university sector (which includes seven universities and a number of teaching and art colleges) and the

Institute of Technology sector (which consists of thirteen Institutes of Technology most of which began as Regional Technical colleges in the 1960s and 1970s). In recent years a number of private educational colleges offering a range of courses, often with an emphasis on business or vocational training, have been established however to date they remain a relatively minor phenomenon within Irish Higher Education.

The tertiary education system has been completely transformed over the past three decades (White, 2001). The key change over this time has been the expansion of the number of places in third level. In line with broader international trends (Trow, 1973) a small elite university system has developed into a far more diversified system of 'mass' education. What is significant though is that in historical terms these changes happened in a relatively short period of time. The overall rate of admission to tertiary education has risen from 20 per cent of school leavers in 1980 to 46 per cent in 1998 and to 53 per cent in 2010 (HEA, 2010; McCoy, Byrne, O'Connell, Kelly, & Doherty, 2010). Most of this growth occurred in the late 1980s and 1990s and the rate of growth had slowed down somewhat in recent years. However, in the past three years, largely as a consequence of the economic crisis, there has also been 13.2% growth in student numbers (HEA, 2010). Colleges in the Republic of Ireland are currently catering for 188,000 undergraduate and graduate students (HEA, 2011) in a population of 4.5 million. Just under two thirds of these students are enrolled in universities. Full-time primary degree courses typically last between 3 and 4 years. Both the institutes of technology and the universities also offer a range of undergraduate and postgraduate diplomas and certificates which usually last between one and two years. Full-time postgraduate diplomas and degrees ordinarily take between one and two years and doctoral level course take between 3 and 4 years.

Five developments of particular significance have taken place in Higher Education institutions during this period of growth and expansion: convergence and diversification; feminisation; marketisation; the further integration of higher education into broader social and economic policy linked to flexible provision and lifelong learning policy; and finally the development of the access agenda as a response to persistent inequality. The first four issues will be summarised very briefly as they are of limited relevance to the work of this project or have been discussed briefly already. However, the issue of access will be covered in greater depth.

Convergence and diversification: Originally the binary system of universities of and Institutes of Technology was broadly envisaged as the division between institutions wedded to the principle of broad based liberal and scientific education, which would be provided for by the universities, and more technical and vocational form of education, which would be offered by the Institutes of Technology (IoTs). As such the IoTs were viewed as more open and accessible to non-traditional students. However, many of the IoTs are now offering a range of degrees in subjects such as languages and the social sciences and universities are offering a wide range of practitioner orientated degrees, diplomas and certificates. Besides which the status of technical knowledge, which was primarily identified with the IoTs, has risen as the Irish economy became more reliant on ICT, biotechnology and pharmaceutical



industries since the 1990s. So although the binary division remains in place the system has developed in an unexpected way and the IoTs and universities have partially converged.

There has also been enormous diversification within tertiary education over the past thirty years. Part of this has been due to the steady expansion of degree courses for jobs that previously did not require formal accreditation (for instance in fields such as care work and trade and craft apprenticeships). These changes reflect the increasingly professionalised and credentialised nature of many sectors of the Irish labour market. The return on a degree remains relatively high in terms of remuneration and graduates are less likely to be unemployed than a non-graduates (HEA, 2008a). However, there is some evidence that diversification has been accompanied by differentiation and the emergence of new hierarchies between institutions and between disciplines (Byrne, 2009; Fleming & Finnegan, 2011; Fleming, Loxley, Kenny & Finnegan, 2010). In the past year the Higher Education Authority has signalled that it wishes to lead and consolidate the process of expansion, convergence and diversification in a more coherent way as these ad hoc developments have led to needless duplication of efforts across the sector.

Female participation in Higher Education: Women have entered into third level education in much greater number over the past three decades and “female graduates represent 55.7% of all undergraduate graduates and 60.2% of postgraduate graduates” (HEA, 2010a, p 11). This reflects the fact that girls are also outperforming boys at school in terms of exam results and have higher retention rates in HE. However, it should be noted that many disciplines, such as engineering or education still have very unequal gender participation rates.

Marketisation: There has been an increasing emphasis in state policy on participating in the burgeoning global education market (Hunt, 2010). Recent policy documents have also highlighted the importance of increasing the level of externally funded research in HEIs and of accessing funding from non-state sources (Hunt, 2010). This has been accompanied by an ever greater reliance on measurable targets and more flexible and temporary contracts for staff in HEIs (Lynch, 2006). Once again this is in line with global policy developments (Ball, 2007). Furthermore, judging by international experience (Shavit, 2007) the appearance of private colleges within Irish education offering degree level courses may well have a significant impact on future patterns of access and attainment.

Flexible educational systems and lifelong learning: As noted earlier education has become an integral part of broader policy strategies of the state and the government. As part of this process there has been significant investment in Higher Education and the emergence of a new strategic approach to HE. The 1997 Universities Act established the facilitation of lifelong learning a one of the key objectives of the sector as well a fulfilling the more traditional role of teaching and developing new scientific knowledge and expanding research capacity. Again lifelong learning has been used to link these objectives and within this broad remit tertiary education is tasked with developing greater and more open links to further education institutions, furthering social inclusion and general upskilling of the population.

All these elements are clearly foregrounded in Skilbeck's influential report on Irish HE in which he advocates the adoption of a 'lifelong learning mentality' (2001, p. 14) by which he means primarily the development of a more flexible, open and inclusive system of higher education. He notes in particular the need to develop a more flexible system of entry and accreditation aimed at directly attracting 'non-traditional' learners. This call, which has been echoed again and again since the publication of this report needs to be put into context. Historically the Irish system has been quite rigid with the vast majority of new entrants, typically 18 year old school leavers, being allocated places based on their performance in their final school examinations. This rigidity is also discernible in the pathways available for progressing through higher education once you have gained access to a given course. Full-time 3-4 year courses are the norm, and the site, curricula and mode of delivery are usually fixed.

However, there has been a concerted effort to create new modes of entry and progression (see HEA, 2009 for the relevant position paper)¹⁰. Key to this has been the forging of links with Further Education programmes using the new National Framework of Qualifications¹¹ established in 2002 which aims to standardise qualifications in keeping with the aims of the Bologna process and the Lisbon agenda. Besides this there are now outreach and access programmes across the sector, along with FE-HE linkage projects, including new web based services¹² and recognition of prior learning initiatives. These changes have given a statutory basis for FE and formalised procedures within FE and community education (see DES, 1995; Geaney, 1998).

Transferring between courses in tertiary education has become easier as colleges have adopted modular accreditation and there are now more places available through interviews rather than solely through exam performance. Flexible/part-time provision has increased from 7% of the total student body to 14.1% in 2006 (HEA, 2010). However, the grant and fee structure still heavily favours full-time students and part-time students still face numerous challenges (Darmody & Fleming, 2010).

This shift to more flexible provision has been consistently linked in policy and strategy documents to the other major objective of university lifelong learning -widening access and participation.

The access agenda has become increasingly central over the past fifteen years to Irish Higher education. (DES, 1995, 2000, 2001; HEA, 2008b, 2010b; Hunt, 2010; NOEA, 2006, 2009; Skilbeck and O'Connell, 2000). While the discussion of access and equity issues within the sector precedes the development of lifelong learning policies a version of ULL has featured more and more regularly in policy over the past seven years. The growing importance given to widening participation has resulted in system wide changes and new

¹⁰ See http://www.heai.ie/files/files/file/HEA%20Flexible%20Learning%20Paper_Nov%202009.pdf

¹¹ See National Framework of Qualifications URL: <http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/>

¹² See <http://www.bluebrick.ie/AboutUs.aspx>

approaches to policy and funding (especially in terms of fees and grants) and the development of access programmes and the establishment of access offices. In 2003 the National Office of Equity of Access to Higher Education was set up by the Higher Education Authority, to oversee and implement access initiatives. In the past two years equal access data has been gathered by HEIs and there are currently plans to use this data to link future state funding to the achievement of access targets. There can be little doubt that access occupies a central place in Irish HE both in terms of policy, practice and research.

Within access policies a number of key target groups were identified - working class students, students with disabilities and mature students (HEA, 2008, 2011). Data is now collected on the participation levels of these groups and assessed against pre-set targets. Overall there has been less emphasis within access policy and offices on ethnic minorities and migrants but broader policies on education and social inclusion have highlighted the importance of providing access to these groups as well (DES, 2000) and the Department for Education and Science recently published a paper which linked access in HE to the issue of intercultural education ¹³. Irish Travellers have also been listed as a 'target' group in a recent review of access in HE (HEA, 2010b).

The work of access offices has definitely had an impact on Irish HE and there has been some progress in widening access albeit from a very low base. The biggest change has been in the number of mature students attending tertiary education. The percentage of new entrants who are mature (ie over 23) has gone from 4.5 % of full time new entrants in 1998 to 13.6% in 2010 (HEA, 2008b; HEA, 2010b). However, it should be noted that this is still below the HEA's own 2010 target of 17%. The overall percentage of students with disabilities in the undergraduate student body has gone from .65% in 1993/94 to 3.2% in 2006 (HEA, 2008b) and this group comprise 6% of all new entrants in 2010 (HEA, 2010b). There has also been considerable improvement in the provision of assistive technology over the past decade and a new charter on inclusive education has been drawn up for students with disabilities.

Social class continues to exert a strong influence on participation rates in Higher Education and class inequality remains a key issue in HE (Clancy, 1982, 1988, 1995; Clancy & Wall, 2000). By far the highest rates of participation in HE are people from a higher professional and managerial background and entrants from these groups have reached saturation levels. In response to this situation access programmes have forged links with schools in disadvantaged areas and more college places are now offered through access courses. Initially targets were set for students from families of skilled and unskilled manual workers and there has been a steady increase in students from skilled manual occupational backgrounds attending college. There has been more uneven results for people from semi- and unskilled socio-economic groups and there has been a noticeable decline in participation of entrants from non-manual backgrounds (HEA, 2011). The non-manual group is large and heterogeneous but significantly now includes many of the more routine poorly paid service jobs in the Irish economy. This has been highlighted in two recent research

¹³For relevant document see

http://www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/OtherPublications/OtherPublicationsDownloads/Intercultural_education_strategy.pdf



projects (Loxley, Fleming, Kenny & Finnegan, 2010; McCoy, Byrne, O'Connell, Kelly, & Doherty, 2010). Overall the participation rates for working class students are below what the HEA targets set for 2010.

Overall, there can be little doubt that the access 'rationale' has been diffused widely and that important changes have occurred in higher education institutions in Ireland-most notably the development of access offices and the deployment of assistive technologies, the design of new routes of entry and progression, the establishment of partnerships with FE and outreach work with schools. Moreover there can be little question that there has been considerable effort to develop a more systemic and integrated and empirically based approach to both systemic flexibility and social equality.

However, despite these enormous changes which have brought unprecedented numbers of mature students into HE and made tertiary education far more accessible to students with disabilities stark inequalities in participation continue to characterise Irish Higher Education (most notably for working class students and Irish travellers). It is also open to question whether widening participation has entailed the sort profound rethinking of the culture and practices of higher education -in terms of new forms of pedagogy, curricula and courses and spaces which are commensurate with the needs, values and experiences of 'non-traditional' students that some scholars have advocated (Lynch, 1999; Thompson, 2000).

Finally in the midst of a deep economic crisis the question arises whether the access agenda can be developed given that there have been budget cuts and there are restrictions in place on further recruitment within HE. However, two recent publications have reaffirmed a commitment to a version of lifelong learning that links economic competitiveness to widening participation (HEA, 2011; Hunt 2010). On the other hand a report in the first week of November 2011 has mooted the idea of restricting numbers and the reintroduction of fees seems very likely.

Research on Lifelong learning and Access in Ireland

As a policy model that links developments in adult, community and further education to an expanded third level sector there has been a good deal of discussion of lifelong learning amongst policymakers, academics and practitioners. Much of this debate and research has been very general but there have been four major sources of more focussed research on lifelong learning the EU, the Irish state, adult and community educators and third level academics. The EU has been particularly important and has helped to build the profile of the concept of lifelong learning in Ireland through a wide variety of measures aimed at students and the funding of research at all levels of the educational system most notably through the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme¹⁴. This programme has facilitated transnational qualitative research on access and lifelong learning from a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches .

¹⁴ See http://ec.europa.eu/ireland/education/links/index_en.htm or Leargas <http://www.llp.ie/> for further details



EU funded research of this sort alongside HEA funded initiatives accounts for a good deal of current research available on the topic as well as the organisational basis for networks concerned with lifelong learning. Currently the HEA is funding 22 projects related to access and lifelong learning (HEA, 2010, p 12), These ongoing projects have a variety of aims; identifying best practice, evaluating specific measures and initiatives, enhancing collaboration and building networks between HEIs.

As noted earlier research based on large quantitative datasets has been an important point of reference for the HEA and the Department of Education. This includes Clancy's enormously influential studies of participation (Clancy, 1982, 1988, 1995; Clancy & Wall, 2000) and the data gathered by the OECD. Significantly the HEA has in the past three years developed its own data gathering capacity with the specific aim of analysing trends in access. Overall there has been less emphasis on qualitative research but in recent years the HEA has sponsored, large scale mixed methods research which is relevant to access and lifelong learning (McCoy, Byrne, O'Connell, Kelly, & Doherty, 2010¹⁵). This has been supplemented by regular reviews of the sector and research undertaken by access offices in individual institutions.

A similar situation, in which state and EU sponsorship has been vital to research on LL, is also observable outside HE. For example Pobal the community development management company is currently being funded to plan public events and hold seminars on 'Delivering Lifelong Learning in Disadvantaged Communities'¹⁶. There has also been a swathe of commentary on the implementation of policy from Aontas, the national adult education organisation (for an example of this sort of work see Brady, 2007). It has organised consultations, written position papers and organised conferences and has recently undertaken research on the lifelong learning needs of older people and has previously explored gender and lifelong learning (Kavanagh, 2007).

This has been supplemented by the articles in their main publication *The Adult Learner* which has for over a decade examined some of the theoretical and practical implications of the lifelong learning agenda for adult education. This included a series of pieces commenting on the Green and White Papers on adult education (Fleming, 2004; Granville, 1999; Regan, 1999) and articles that looked at lifelong learning in other states (Schuller, 2011; Slowey , 2004).

This research is part of a wider body of work that has critically assessed the implementation of lifelong learning policies in both adult education and Higher Education (Clarke, 2003; Connolly, 2005; Connolly, 2009; Grummel, 2007; Finnegan, 2008; Fleming, 2006; Fleming, Collins, & Coolohan, 1999; Fleming, Loxley, Kenny & Finnegan, 2010; Healy & Slowey, 2006 O'Brien & O' Fathaigh, 2007b; Schuetze & Slowey, 2000). The broad, and sometimes vague, nature of the debate on lifelong learning means that these articles encompass a large range of positions embedded in very different fields of practice.

¹⁵ This has been done in conjunction with bodies such as the state think tank the Economic and Social Research Institute and academic departments.

¹⁶ See <https://www.pobal.ie/Funding%20Programmes/Learning/Pages/Background.aspx>

However, it is possible to highlight the major points that have emerged from this body of research. Firstly, many commentators have argued that the idea of lifelong learning has tremendous potential in allowing us to re-imagine education and develop a new integrated model of learning in society (Connolly, 2009; Fleming, 2006; Moreland, 2007). Secondly, it was argued that the development of lifelong learning offered an opportunity to bring some of the insights and practices of adult education into HE (Connolly, 2009; Fleming & Murphy, 1999; Inglis & Murphy, 1999). This excitement about the potential of LL has waned somewhat as some of the hoped for changes in Irish adult education have not materialised. Thirdly, many writers contend that the implementation of the policies has fallen short of its rhetorical claims in various ways (Grummel, 2007; Finnegan, 2008; Fleming, 2005; Lolich, 2011; O'Brien & O' Fathaigh, 2007b). There is no consensus on why this is the case) or whether all the various objectives of lifelong learning are truly commensurable, but all these commentators have drawn attention to enduring inequalities and power structures to determine the way lifelong learning has developed in Ireland. In this sense the debate about lifelong learning has deeper roots in theories about access and equality (Connolly, Fleming, McCormack, & Ryan, Murphy & Fleming, 2003; Lynch, 1999; Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009).

This emphasis on equality in the lifelong learning debate reflects the influence of the School of Social Justice in University College Dublin and the Department of Adult and Community Education at the National University of Ireland. Both places have well developed connections with community and Further Education institutions across Ireland and promoting social inclusion has informed their main research priorities. This is also reflected in some of the student research of these two departments. However, it would be a mistake to exaggerate the extent to which this has influenced educational research as a whole (for instance, and this is only a very rough and ready indicator, less than two dozen theses of over 1300 educational theses completed and registered with the Educational Studies Association of Ireland between 1993-2000 had equality, access or lifelong learning in their titles¹⁷).

Research on Access and Lifelong Learning: A Summary

Overall, research on lifelong learning in Ireland has been steered by international and national policy objectives defined by large well established institutional agendas. The EU has had a key role in this process and the HEA has been particularly important in defining lifelong learning especially through the gathering of large scale data sets. It is currently funding a broad swathe of research and networking initiatives aimed at developing a more integrated tertiary education sector with a strong emphasis on access and lifelong learning. Critical evaluation of the implementation of policy has come from practitioners, academics and adult education organisations. This work has been generally enthusiastic about the possibilities and potential of the idea of lifelong learning but critical of the implementation and in some cases has asked what are the precise social forces driving educational change.

¹⁷ See <http://www.esai.ie/resources/cumulativeindexofeducationtheses>



However, it should be noted and the case studies chosen by the Irish team will illustrate this quite clearly that the relationship between research and practice is far from direct. It will be argued that much of the early work on access emerged in a piecemeal fashion as a response to a wide variety of institutional and departmental agendas and the expansion of university. In this sense LL and ULL has offered useful post-facto explanations for change and a new ways of thinking through already existing initiatives.

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