



**DIALOGUE – Bridges between Research and Practice in ULLL**

**Group 1: Access and Progression**

**Partner: NUI Maynooth, Ireland**



**NUI MAYNOOTH**  
Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

***CASE STUDY 2: The Return to Learning Programme: A Bridge to Higher Education?***

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## Reflective Summary

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. 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. ULL dominates thinking about access and widening participation in Irish HE. This case study looks at how a pioneering Return to Learning Programme which grew out of a broad field of practice in community education was set up over twenty years ago at NUI Maynooth by the Department of Adult and Community Education. It is an example of flexible ULL provision before the development of LL discourse and policies. A key question, thrown up by this and the other case study on Kilkenny Campus, is whether given the cost of the course and the manner in which standard measures of assessment and evaluation within the university 'proper' remain unquestioned it is open to debate whether this sort of initiative will offset the structural inequalities of schooling and HE. Again the striking fact to emerge from this case study was the dearth of research on a programme which has been running in the University for twenty years and which has provided rich and innovative learning experiences for many returning students.

**Keywords:** Return to Learning, Widening Participation, Life Long Learning, Access, Mature Students.

## Abstract

This case study describes the 'Return to Learning' programme designed by the Department of Adult and Community Education at NUI Maynooth, which has been running for almost twenty years.

The case study will outline the origin of the return to learning project, how it functions and use it to analyse the development of access programmes across HE in general in Ireland. The case study will conclude with a summary of the issue this raises for ULL. Finally the key points made throughout the documented will be reiterated.



## **A brief overview of the Return to Learning Programme**

The Return to Learning Programme (RTLTP) project began in 1991. The course is designed as a stepping-stone for mature students who wish to return to learning, but have not studied in any formal way for a number of years. It aims both to widen participation and facilitate lifelong learning by offering a flexible progression route to HE.

Over approximately a year long course participants are given an opportunity to sample a number of academic subjects so that they will be able to make a more informed choice when selecting subjects later. The course aims to familiarise people with the structure and requirements of third level education; to equip them with some of the necessary skills required and help them identify the subjects or courses that they may later wish to undertake. The content includes modules on Academic Writing, Reading, Library, Note Taking and Examination skills so they can hone the necessary academic skills for further study. The course also features a series of introductions to degree subjects taught on campus. The main subjects on offer are English Literature and Classics, which reflects the origin of the programme in the university's extra-mural programme developed in the 1970s and 1980s which primarily offered courses in liberal arts and professional development. It was these courses provided the basis for NUIM's very successful Continuing Education initiatives detailed above.

The admission requirements state that participants must be 22 years or over on January of their year of entry. In most cases no academic requirements or qualifications are necessary to enter the course. The assessment of the students work over the year consists of 85% minimum attendance, a research project, participation in class and an essay based on a Learning Journal. Students have the option to defer or resubmit work if they wish.

The programme is offered on a part-time basis on the university campus. In the past it has been also been run off campus in partnership with other agencies and has been adapted to suit the needs of the particular groups identified. In these instances funding streams for social inclusion and training and development purposes have covered the cost of the programme delivery. This year there are plans to offer it on the Kilkenny outreach Campus in partnership with a local Community Development organisation and a local Jobs Club. The partnership is currently seeking funding and identifying participants.

Over the years the programme has evolved and expanded, mainly in terms of student numbers and in the addition of the evening provision, which was introduced subject to demand from students who had commitments during the day. The course is now held in two time slots: two mornings per week for 100 hours, and one evening per week also for 100 hours. Participants are expected to submit work throughout the year.

The programme is accredited as an NUI Foundation Certificate course. Students who obtain a First Class Honours or Second Class Honours Grade 1 may access a Bachelor of Arts degree programme in NUI Maynooth. The majority of students who enrol now follow this path. The NUI Certificate is linked to European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and this provides students with an opportunity to use the NUI Certificate as a progression route to other



courses or degree programmes within the credit transfer system which operates primarily through the Recognition of Accredited Prior Learning -RAPL) .

There is a fee of €900 for the year. This is sometimes covered by NGOs and other private funds but students do not qualify for a grant. Again, this imposes limits on access and widening participation.

### **Origine for Rationale RTLP and its Subsequent Development**

RTLP began as very small ‘grassroots’ initiative among a group of community educators and Adult Education academics in continuing education work and extra-mural provision. As such the establishment of the programme was not policy driven nor was it the product of a university strategic decision. It predates the explosion of interest in LLL or the institutionalisation of access. It is perhaps significant that the three founders of the project began educational work in community education and applied the philosophy and practices they had absorbed outside the university to the course. These educators realised that the standard extra-mural course was overlooking student needs in terms of offering the skills and confidence to tackle university courses.

From both interviews undertaken for this project and from the literature produced about the course it is clear that an adult education philosophy grounded in humanism was fundamental to how the course was designed and is conducted. The courses are underpinned by a belief that adults learn best when the learning is meaningful, relevant, accessible and applicable. Tutors and administrative staff argue that it is vital that the approach should be ‘learner friendly’ and that participants are involved in the process of learning, have their learning needs incorporated into the design and delivery of the course, know that their experience and skills inform the curriculum, are encouraged to reflect critically and take responsibility for their own learning. This approach also underpins the central role of reflective learning journals and participation. In interviews with participants it was highlighted that individual attention and support are given to help individuals cope with course requirements and that generally the peer support element that the programme encourages is key both to retention and further progression. Although it is relatively small the programme has steadily grown and reflects clearly the general trends discussed earlier with regard to mature students and the growth in numbers in the wake of the recession. The figures in Table 1 illustrate this.

Year	Students	Centre
1991-1992	6	Maynooth
1992-1993	8	Maynooth
1993-1994	12	Maynooth
1994-1995	11	Maynooth
1995-1996	16	Maynooth
1996-1997	17	Maynooth

1997-1998	29	Maynooth
1998-1999	26	Maynooth
1999-2000	24	Maynooth
	15	Newbridge
2000-2001	28	Maynooth
2001-2002	16	Maynooth
2002-2003	33	Maynooth
2003-2004	32	Maynooth
2004-2005	30	Maynooth
2005-2006	31	Maynooth
2006-2007	38	Maynooth
2007-2008	70	Maynooth
2008-2009	82	Maynooth
2009-2010	74	Maynooth
	10	Soilse – Dublin
2010-2011	66	Maynooth

Table 1

An interesting feature of the programme has been that the two key tutors who founded the project under the supervision and with the support of the Department of Adult and Community Education, remain at the core of the programme. They continue to develop and integrate the programme into the mainstream of the University, building links with the Library, with Learning Supports and IT Platform Moodle and with the Access Office where the Mature Student Officer is situated. The tutors have also built a close relationship with the Admission Officer in the University who sees the programme mainly in terms of a feeder route course onto third level courses in NUI Maynooth.

### **An Access Course but not as we know it?**

The two tutors who have been involved with the programme from the beginning are of the view that when the Return to Learning was originally developed it was not seen as an access course only, and that, they the tutors have remained true to that principle.

Access courses as they have developed in the last ten to fifteen years have been underpinned by a varied set of objectives and some common themes depending on the sector or sectors which design and deliver them, as we will see below. In some cases these programmes provide a general progression route to higher education, equipping students with academic skills and preparing them to compete for third level entry.

Other programmes act as a direct progression route for particular subjects such as science and engineering to ensure a wider distribution of mature students among these less traditional areas. Many courses have arisen out of institutional policy on widening access and target lower socio economic groups in order to make the institution more accessible,



very often to communities in their own hinterland. The Return to Learning predated these developments and has fulfilled many of the objectives identified by those programmes that have come after it, however it has maintained a focus on the value of learning for its own sake first and foremost, and has kept in touch with its deep roots in adult education pedagogies and philosophy.

There has been an ongoing debate in the sector in Ireland relating to how Access courses to third level are delivered, by whom and how they are funded. In 2009 a review of higher education access/foundation course provision was commissioned by a group representing Higher Education Institutions that deliver access courses, the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Institutes of Technology Ireland (IoTI), the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Department of Education & Science<sup>1</sup>

This research identified three models of delivery across 37 access/foundation programmes: programmes delivered by a single HE institutions; programmes delivered by a partnership of HE institutions and programmes delivered by a HE institution in partnership with one or more FE partners.

There had been a debate for some time as to the value of HE institutions delivering access programmes in their own institutions. Government funding agencies were inclined to view this function as resting with the FE sector where funding and accreditation structures facilitated a more integrated model. However, in the course of this research HE personnel put forward strong arguments in favour of the role that their sector plays in the delivery of these programmes. These included:

- specialist knowledge of HE subject areas
- the opportunity HE provision gives for demystifying higher education and facilitating familiarization with the physical environment of a HE campus and some HE staff
- introduction to HE teaching styles and assessment approaches
- better progression when the courses are delivered by the same institution.

### **Learning from the Case Study**

Again what is striking in the case study is that the link between academic research and practice is far from direct. All the key players involved in RTLTP were responding to perceived mature student needs more than any body of research. The initiative essentially took an established model, the classic liberal extra-mural course and redesigned it. Even though all the workers were aware of social inequality this access measure was primarily understood as an initiative in widening participation in education with a secondary focus on social inequality. So even more clearly that the outreach campus in Kilkenny it emerged from a

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.iua.ie/iua-activities/documents/HigherEducationAccessandFoundationCoursesAResearchReportApril2009.pdf>



broad field of practice, namely community education, using its principles and approaches to good effect in a new setting.

The Return to Learning programme was a pioneering initiative long before the White Paper on Adult Education or the establishment of Access Officers or policies. It is an example of flexible ULL provision before the development of LL discourse and policies. It is testament to the growth and power of LLP that it is now seen in these new terms. It is still running today independently of the Access Service but linked, and as we have seen, it sees itself as more than an access course.

In this sense the strengths and limitations of RTLP can be linked to the application of adult education 'common sense' at the entry point for the university. It is clear from research with ex-students that the work RTLP do is highly valued and that the work provides a fundamental transition point. In fact many recent graduates have noted that the return to learning was a richer group learning experience than the degree that they went on to obtain. However, given the cost of the course and the manner in which the standard curricular objectives, measures of assessment and evaluation within the university 'proper' remain unquestioned it is open to debate whether this sort of initiative will offset the structural inequalities of schooling and HE.

Again a striking fact that emerged from this Case Study was the dearth of research on a programme that has been running in the university for twenty years.



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