

6. On being an Access student

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Although mature students have long ceased to be an object of curiosity, those who enrol in a third-level institution via an Access Programme are still comparatively under researched.

This paper will explore the experiences of a small group of students (5) whose entry route to Dundalk Institute of Technology was via the successful completion of a 12 week Access 21 programme jointly funded with the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF).

The factors which prompted their initial decision will be traced as will their verdict on the adequacy of the access programme in readying them for the challenges of returning to college.

Finally, with the benefit of a full academic year behind them, the students' experiential reflections will be noted for incorporation into the next programme.

Introduction and Background

Access Programmes have been the subject of renewed interest in recent years. This attention has been triggered by a number of factors e.g.

- The publication of the HEA National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013 and the new target of increasing the numbers of non – standard entrants to higher education from the present 24% to 30%.
- Strategic Innovation Fund initiatives, e.g. Access 21, introduced in 2007, to provide Access Programmes in outreach locations in many parts of the country have been notably successful. The case studies researched for this paper are the product of one such scheme.
- Newly emerging patterns of employment.
- As Ireland Inc, seeks to regain its competitiveness, one of the results is changed models of employment with reduced hours/part-time contracts becoming a commonplace. The part-time attendance pattern required by Access Programmes sits very well with this altered employment template.
- With the numbers of school – leavers (17-19 years) going straight to third level expected to reach saturation levels during the next few years, attention naturally turns to other potential and, until now, relatively untapped sources of students to fill existing places.

Although Access Programmes in various forms have been around for the last decade, they have not been widely researched – possibly because the numbers graduating to third level from such programmes are still relatively small. However, as they are likely to figure more prominently in the future, it is opportune to examine their worth both to the student and the institutions.

In 2007 I was temporarily assigned to the Access Office in DkIT where one of my functions was to assist in the organising and administration of an Access Programme to be delivered at an outreach centre. Over the following period I got to know this particular cohort of students very well and although I am no longer attached to the Access Office I thought it would be useful to examine how these students viewed their experiences to date as any insights would be useful in informing future offerings.

Methodology

7 students chose to register with DkIT and it is these 7 who provide the population for this research. No effort was made to contact students who opted to go elsewhere for the following reasons;

- The tight timeframe available to carry out the research
- The research window coincided with the main summer examination period.

I accept that the resultant sample is too small to permit authoritative conclusions but I would argue that it is still worthwhile because of the dearth of published research on the subject.

The same factors that determined the sampling frame also influenced the research instrument. After consideration of the various options, the final selection was purposive sampling by means of semi structured personally administered interview. Purposive sampling involves the selection of case studies that are rich in data about the central issues with which the research is concerned (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Consequently, purposive sampling is suited to research which aims to develop a rich and detailed understanding of social phenomena in the context in which they naturally occur (Patton, 1987). It also demands that the number of cases involved be significantly less than when probabilistic sampling is used (Easterby – Smith *et al*, 1991).

The approach taken was to draw up a list of topics to be pursued but not to impose any strict or particular order on their introduction. The guiding principle throughout was to get the interviewee to talk freely, establish a rapport and then try to deal with the desired topics. This technique worked well with some interviews running to 80-90 minutes but the average time taken was about 50 minutes. Interviews were arranged by appointment and although no refusals were received only 5 of the 7 interviews took place.

All interviews were taped after the customary assurances were given. Taped interviews are unrivalled as a factual record of what was said but face to face interviews provide additional dimensions which can be used to interpret what the interviewee is saying e.g. body language, facial expression etc. After listening to each interview at least twice, I began the task of writing up each case. I disciplined myself to record faithfully the views of the interviewee and to avoid subjective comment or interpretation. Each respondent was given a written copy so that any errors or omissions could be corrected prior to final editing.

The names used in the following case studies are fictitious.

Case Study 1

Tom lives just across from DkIT but had never been inside. He heard about the Access Programme from a DkIT staff member who was part of his social network. At the time he was at a crossroads and looking for a new direction in his life. He had left formal education with a Junior Certificate and was employed in the building industry until ill health forced him to rethink his options. He was apprehensive about applying and confessed to knowing little about what went on in DkIT even though he lived nearby. He never considered third level even though he was an avid reader.

Underpinning his decision to apply for the Access Programme were 2 main drivers;

- A desire to position himself so that he could support his family again
- Deep down he felt that, given the chance, he could achieve at third level.

Tom's research into the Access Programme was confined to asking questions of his DkIT friend. 'Although he gave me an idea of what it would be like I still went into the Access Programme without any clear realisation of what to expect. This was all new to me.'

Coming from the construction industry Tom knew what the word 'access' meant and he could see its relevance in the educational context but he wondered how many people would understand what was on offer if they only had a newspaper advertisement entitled 'Access Programme' to work with. He also opined that the Access Programme organiser needs to address the fears and doubts, especially financial, of potential applicants. This should be done prior to application if possible. The qualifying criteria for financial assistance to go to third level still permit a lot of students to fall through the cracks. A system to pick up such students would greatly improve the students' chances of devoting all their effort to passing the Access Programme by removing the financial uncertainty which threatens to undermine a return to education.

Tom's first surprise when he started the Access Programme was that he had to decide on his third level course choice within a couple of weeks as this choice would dictate which of the elective subjects he should take. He chose engineering which required that he take two maths modules. He thought he was good at maths but found he had to work hard just to keep up. His favourite subject

was philosophy – ‘I couldn’t get enough of it’ and his favourite memory of the programme was sitting outside on a warm summer evening listening to the lecturer holding forth on Descartes. He was very happy with his subject choices as they confirmed for him where his predilections lay.

Over the course of the programme he got to know the other participants and came to value greatly the group dynamic. He marvelled at the great diversity of backgrounds and contributions and when the odd doubt about continuing appeared he always dismissed it as he felt he would be letting the group down by quitting.

For Tom the best thing about the Access Programme was the positive atmosphere fostered by the tutors. This approach was at variance with Tom’s preconceived ideas which were largely based on his second level experience. Assignments and exams did cause some anxieties but he recognised their purpose and worth.

What could be improved? Not enough information on the financial implications of embarking on a programme that could last 3-4 years. ‘No point in bringing a student through an Access Programme if the issue of funding a 3-4 year college programme has not been addressed.’

He clearly recalls the sense of achievement and elation he experienced on hearing that he had passed the Access Programme exams and would be offered a place in DkIT. ‘I remember thinking that with 3 teenage children, I will be going to college just ahead of them and hope to be in a position to advise them.’

Tom settled in to college life quickly ‘The first few weeks I went around in a state of euphoria. The experience, the buzz, the new knowledge, the atmosphere, caused an adrenalin rush which lasted several weeks. I felt wonderful and wanted to know everything.’ After a few weeks he came down to earth but continued to enjoy his college experience.

Case Study 2

Jim had always been interested to going to college but didn’t get the opportunity until now. He heard about the Access Programme from a friend who was organising it. This happened at a time when work was beginning to dry up and as a self employed person he thought it might be the right time to fulfil his wish for a third level education. Jim didn’t know that as a mature person he could have applied for a college place without the Access Programme. He viewed the Access Programme as a way of changing his mindset from work to study – ‘an awakening, a conditioning process to prepare for what was ahead.’

He enjoyed the small class atmosphere on the programme and had no difficulty with any of the subjects. He had some concerns about maths but found the lecturing style and pace overcame this. He had very positive experiences of the group. ‘The broad range of skills and experiences of the participants was very useful and was to prove particularly valuable in solving the financial difficulties which loomed for several of the group.’

The subject assignments provided an important feedback mechanism especially as most people on the programme had been out of education for some time. When he got his exam results he felt a sense of achievement and his confidence received a boost.

His early college experience was one of constant change and a steep learning curve ‘with constant timetable changes and room scheduling, coping with deadlines, getting to grips with how to use the library, it took me 4-6 weeks to settle in.’

‘I had gotten a good mark for maths on the Access Programme but in college, classes were bigger and more intense and I missed the same easy interaction with the lecturer. I failed maths in my first semester exams but resolved to get extra tuition in semester 2 so that I wouldn’t fall behind. Nothing adequately prepares you for your first set of college exams. Anxiety, especially with maths, that I wouldn’t do myself justice, was only assuaged when I got my results and found that I had done better than I expected.’

Jim was elected class representative for his group and enjoys the responsibility.

With his first year now completed, Jim reflects on what it meant to him, ‘Learning to stand on your own two feet was a big thing – you are responsible for you. Learning to use a laptop, communication

with your peers, self-belief, and a sense of empowerment that allows you to achieve whatever you want.'

Case Study 3

John heard about the Access Programme when he called into DkIT to enquire about mature student entry. He applied to the CAO on that basis but also applied for the Access Programme as he felt it would ease him back into the habit of study. He had been thinking of going to DkIT for years and had already attended two PLC courses neither of which provided him with the career opportunity he sought.

He attended the Open Evening and was very enthused about what he heard. He felt excited about the subjects he would be doing as they were new and challenging and he went home afterwards in a very positive frame of mind. He did some research about the programme mainly to ascertain if it would provide him with an alternative route into college should his CAO application be unsuccessful.

He was accepted on his college course first choice whilst still attending the Access Programme but he opted to continue with the Access Programme because he felt he was benefitting from the discipline and structure that the course provided.

Considering the numbers attending the programme he was very satisfied with the range of subjects offered. He appreciated the group interaction commenting on the diversity of views and the opportunity to meet and talk with people very different from his own social circle. 'Everyone got along with everyone else and the bond is still there. Consequently I already knew several people who would also be starting in DkIT and this was very reassuring when the time came to start my third level course. They were also very supportive especially at times when I felt like giving up.'

John thought the assignments could have been harder but he understood why they were not. He valued the experience of having to assemble and present the information demanded and even during his first year in college he still found himself referring back to his notes on Study Skills and Applied Writing.

He was very happy to pass the Access Programme even though he had already secured a place through CAO. He had mixed emotions about the end of programme exams – for some he was reasonably confident but for others he was extremely nervous. He attributed his success to the fact that he enjoyed the course and was smart enough to realise that you work harder when you enjoy what you are doing.

He was anxious about his first day in college – afraid that he wouldn't fit in. Group projects were useful in breaking down barriers and he also made use of the Mature Students Association. It was Halloween before he settled. At that stage he realised what he had to do and began to apply himself to it. He was very fearful of his first set of college exams because during the semester he had produced all his assignments on computer so he was worried about his handwriting/spelling/grammar skills as he knew he was weak in those areas.

He was delighted with his exam results and this gave him a confidence boost. He was nominated for his class award and this also encouraged him. Looking back on his experiences to date he considers the study skills module was of most importance to him. 'The Access Programme is valuable if like me you have been away from study for a while. I had to learn how to reference etc. This all gives you confidence and you are more comfortable with yourself. I now know things and I realise I learned them on the Access Programme.'

Case Study 4

Kevin heard about the Access Programme from a DkIT lecturer who often visited his place of employment. This word of mouth process took place over a period and Kevin reckons without this contact for research into the idea, he would not have considered applying. He would not have responded to a newspaper advertisement because he wouldn't understand what was on offer. He too attended the open evening and was much relieved to discover that there were others 'in the same boat as myself.'

He had long since hoped to go to third level as many of his second level classmates had done but work beckoned and somehow he had never got around to it. He felt the time was now opportune to fill this void.

Though often ridiculed as a cliché he related particularly to the adage that every journey begins by putting one foot before the other citing in particular the very positive vibes he got from the open evening and subsequent interview. He also evidenced the help he got with the maths module – with which he struggled – until the lecturer did a revision class and it began to make sense.

He too gained much from the group dynamic and the tea-break networking was a very valuable part of the programme. When he got the letter of acceptance on the programme he felt that someone believed he had potential – ‘it was like winning the lotto.’

Overall the Access Programme was fine but again the question of financing the third level course needs to be tackled upfront. Part of the problem here is the seemingly impenetrable bureaucracy one is faced with in trying to access the funding source appropriate to you. This is very off putting to someone who is considering an enormous decision and is already apprehensive about the outcome. For people like Kevin a module on surviving the third level experience would be just as useful as academic writing etc.

Kevin thought the deadlines and time scales very tight. A more leisurely pace with less pressure would be better. Again the group interaction came in for favourable comment ‘I missed them when they scattered over different courses in DkIT.’ The group helped out when he encountered difficulties with maths and when he wavered about continuing there was always someone to talk him round. He found the assignments difficult as he didn’t know how to tackle them or what depth was expected. He also dreaded the exams with the additional pressure of the ticking clock. He was always last to hand up his script!

His first day in college was not easy. The ice breaking session with his new classmates made him very uncomfortable and he tried to leave. His lecturer brought him back and reassured him. ‘Looking back, my introduction to DkIT was ok, but it did come as a shock to me.’ Some time into semester 1 Kevin’s work commitments and home circumstances changed and he decided to take one subject only. At the time of writing he has deferred but hopes to resume next September.

His first comment on his journey (so far) is that Access Programme graduates would benefit from a debriefing session about 4 weeks after starting their college course. This could be used to reassure the students that what they are feeling is perfectly normal and will change over time.

Case Study 5

For **Michael**, the Access Programme really was second chance education because he had registered in DkIT previously but dropped out during 1st year – ‘The time just wasn’t right for me, I was working part time and I wasn’t mature enough to handle all that was going on.’ The catalyst this time around was being made redundant. This gave him the opportunity to take stock and address the urge he always had to pursue a third level education. He came to DkIT where he still knew a few people to see what was on offer and was told about the Access Programme. He attended the open evening and liked what he saw. A bonus for him was knowing one of the other applicants!

Michael thought the Programme valuable for ‘getting your brain in gear in preparation for full time study.’ He had no issues with the subjects but would have preferred if those taking the engineering route were separate from day 1 so that subjects such as maths could be delivered at a level and pace not required by those taking Business/Humanities.

He enjoyed the group – ‘strong people, with strong voices’, especially the break time camaraderie but felt he would have prospered just as well with any other group. The assignments were ok but the exams were scary ‘even though I already had a place through the CAO system’. His first day in DkIT was a pre registration session for mature students. The ice breaking sessions worked well and he had no difficulty mixing with his younger classmates. The main difference between mature students and school leavers is in application – school leavers are more casual about attendance and deadlines whereas mature students have a more responsible approach. He settled in quickly and felt he was in control after 2-3 weeks. He signed up for everything he thought he would need so that when the time

came he would have all the advantages needed. He was quietly confident based on his work rate and the feedback on his semester assignments that he would be ok on his first exams but he still surpassed his own expectations.

Overall, Michael's experience has been coloured by the fact that he did Leaving Certificate and started third level in the usual way albeit some years ago. Of this group he is alone in that experience.

He suggests that the Access Programme could be improved if students received a structured module on the various sources of finance and their qualifying criteria at the commencement of the course.

What have we learned?

Course Promotion

Although a newspaper advertising campaign will always be an essential part of any recruitment drive for an Access Programme, we should never underestimate the potency of a product champion. Several of the case studies mentioned that they heard about the programme from college personnel who 'sold' the idea to them. This is a very effective means of promotion because the potential student has a ready made mentor who can answer any queries. This early stage relationship can be converted into a genuine applicant by addressing the target's needs and establishing trust. Potential students need to be nursed at this delicate stage because the decision they are contemplating is huge and self doubt/fear of failure etc can be anticipated.

Open Evening

An open evening serves several useful purposes;

- An ice – breaker
- Many of the hopes and fears are common to all applicants. This shared emotional state can be very reassuring and acts as a bonding factor
- Meet the team
- A panel of subject specific experts can be more easily assembled to address the various issues which normally surface at such gatherings. Dealing with requests for information on the spot instils confidence by reducing uncertainty.
- Group cohesion
- Would be applicants get to know each other. This gives the group dynamic a chance to start working before the course itself commences. For this particular cohort the group dynamic that established itself had several positive aspects as related by the students;
- Diversity in its broadest sense, age, gender, ethnic origin, work experience, educational level, expectations
- Participation - the competition for 'airtime' in class provided early evidence that the group was comfortable with each other
- Group support. Several respondents commented on this priceless attribute. The group accepted that the Access Programme was not a competition with knowledge a jealously guarded asset, but a resource to be given freely to those in need
- For most students, the Open Evening will be their first experience to cross the threshold of a third level institution so the process of demystifying what goes on there can begin before the commencement of the course proper. This is very important, especially for those students who may still be harbouring doubts that they do not deserve a college education.

Reassurance/Feedback

It is apparent that some way into the course some applicants experience a time of self – doubt. In the case studies these doubts were overcome with the help of other group members but there may be a need for staff intervention/reassurance, perhaps at midpoint in the first semester.

The Access Course

The course itself was well received. Two respondents felt it could have been delivered over a longer period at an easier pace.

There does seem to be a need for regular sessions on the question of finance. Although it may have been a peculiarity of this group, several participants wrestled with financial issues well into their undergraduate year. This had a very unsettling effect at a time when they were likely to be

apprehensive/under pressure and could have undone all the effort that got them this far. Despite a range of schemes available, several of the group struggled to qualify for any of them. Some of them found the bureaucracy of application unfathomable as they had no experience of interacting with the state. There would appear to be a hitherto unfulfilled demand for a funding source to pick up those students who somehow fall through the cracks by failing to qualify for any of the existing schemes.

Modules such as Study Skills and Academic Writing are critically important – with students continuing to refer to them during their undergraduate programme. Assignments are paradoxically a source of anxiety and a comfort. Understandably students facing their first assignment have no experience to draw on so feedback must be constructively delivered and encouragement/praise dispensed as necessary – this is a steep learning curve for most students.

Two of the respondents had already secured a college place (on the grounds of maturity) but still opted to continue with the Access Programme. This suggests that the Access course is not just seen as another entry route to third level. It is also valued as a training exercise to prepare for the longer journey ahead.

The first year experience

By and large the settling in process went well. This is very much an individual process – what works for one student may be anathema to another – and even though students are now dispersed across various disciplines, for those who needed it, the group cohesiveness formed during the Access course, still operated.

Individual experiences varied from 'walking on air' to feelings of being 'cast adrift on a vast ocean'. Most respondents admitted to being very nervous as their semester 1 exams approached. There may be a case for offering a refresher session on exam preparation and technique at an appropriate juncture.

Conclusion

Access Programmes are a comparatively recent development and consequently numbers graduating from them are low. Apart from reporting annual intake numbers and progression rates, little research is available on these innovative accession routes. It is important therefore to examine these offerings in terms of their success in addressing the under representativeness of this group, their attractiveness to potential participants and their relevance to a student's subsequent undergraduate programme. It is intended therefore that this paper will form the base year for what will be a longitudinal study so that participants can be tracked from access to graduate level.

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