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AN EVALUATION OF THE TARGETED INITIATIVE ON ACCESS OF MATURE STUDENTS IN IRELAND

**A REPORT PREPARED JOINTLY FOR THE HIGHER EDUCATION
AUTHORITY
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GLOSSARY

ACCS	Accumulation of Credit and Certification of Subjects
AONTAS	National Association of Adult Education
APEAL	Accreditation of Prior Education, Achievements and Learning
APEL	Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning
BPG(s)	Best Practice Guideline(s)
BTEA	Back to Education Allowance
CAO	Central Applications Office
DES	Department of Education and Science
FETAC	Further Education Training and Awards Council (Formerly NCVA National Council for Vocational Awards)
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HETAC	Higher Education Training and Awards Council (formerly NCEA, National Council for Educational Awards)
IT	Information Technology
ITs	Institutes of Technology
NCI	National College of Ireland
NDEC	National Distance Education Centre (Oscail)
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OUUK	Open University of the United Kingdom
PLC	Post-Leaving Certificate
VECs	Vocational Education Committees
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme

AN EVALUATION OF THE TARGETED INITIATIVE ON ACCESS OF MATURE STUDENTS IN IRELAND

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We are indebted to the seven universities and two colleges that at short notice arranged programmes for visits in connection with our evaluation of the targeted initiative and for the hospitality, both physical and intellectual, shown to us. We are grateful to the many members of faculty and administration who gave time to pursuing our concerns with us, and to ten groups of mature students, with whom we had enlightening and interesting meetings. These reinforced our belief in the importance of encouraging people beyond the usual age of entry to secure admission.

The student survey involved seeking substantial help from institutions and Vocational Education Committees in identifying students. They undertook this at short notice and in a period that included the Christmas break and in some cases the period of examinations at the end of semesters. We express our gratitude to them. We received considerable assistance from Mr John McAvoy and his colleagues of the Central Applications Authority (CAO) in sampling and securing contact with those who had applied to enter as full-time students. We are also grateful to the students and other applicants for admission who took time to complete and return the questionnaires.

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Note: A report of this nature appropriately includes examples of the activities that are being undertaken by institutions to help increase the recruitment of mature students and to improve the quality of the experience. Usually we give the name of the university or college from which the example is drawn, but the identification of an example from one institution does not imply that other institutions are not engaged in the same or in a similar initiative.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report contains the results of two separate, but interlocking, studies on the access and provision for mature students in Irish higher education:

- an evaluation of the Higher Education Authority's targeted initiative in the area of mature student access
- a survey offering a profile of particular targeted groups and seeking their views on existing provision and on possible developments of places for mature students.

The two studies are to provide a basis for the HEA in advising the Department of Education and Science (DES) on the demand for mature student places. The research was undertaken during the period December 2000 to April 2001. However, work on the project was extended until October 2001 in an effort to increase the response of the student survey.

Part I: Methods and Policies

Chapter 1. Purposes, Issues and Methods

Evaluation of the targeted initiative

The evaluation of the targeted initiative on access for mature students (Part II of this report) seeks to:

- assess the effectiveness of the measures to which the funding contributes and to establish what additional measures may be needed to improve effectiveness
- consider other possible approaches to encouraging increased participation by mature students in the context of the tightening labour market (e.g., flexibility of provision, part-time, open and distance learning, supports for students after entry) and to recommend how the initiative could be developed to assist these approaches
- undertake a brief overview of initiatives undertaken in some other countries
- make recommendations on the conditions of funding of access courses (e.g., certification, progression)
- develop appropriate indicators
- produce a best practice guideline.

The study contains a survey of the policy context and the official and academic literature on policies on mature student access. In visits to the seven Irish universities, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick and St Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin, 77 interviews were conducted together with ten meetings with groups of mature students.

The limitations of our findings must be noted: the institutes of technology are not funded under the targeted initiative and the majority of mature students study part-time and outside the universities. In addition, we found that, in many cases, actions taken under the TI are not easily separated from what is already being offered to mature students.

Student survey

Questionnaires were sent to samples of applicants, successful and unsuccessful, for the academic year 2000/01, for places in the seven universities, the two colleges, the 14 institutes of technology, the National College of Art and

Design, the National College of Ireland, and to a sample of six Vocational Education Committees (VECs) – see Part III of this report. A second posting of questionnaires was made including those institutions whose response rates from students were particularly low.

The questionnaires were intended to seek:

- a profile of the groups targeted by the survey
- students' views about their reasons for coming to higher education as mature students
- their views on the barriers to participation
- their perception of the recruitment and selection processes if granted admission
- their views on the appropriateness of existing provision of places for mature students in Ireland and on possible developments in the provision of places and on their experience of higher education.

The principal conclusions are as follows:

- many mature students can be described as delayed entrants as is evident from the high proportion with Leaving Certificates
- mature students return to education for career-related reasons
- reasons not to embark on third-level education after completion of Leaving Certificates were financially-related
- financial issues are a major barrier to becoming a mature student
- opportunities for mature students should be more closely related to the needs of the Irish economy
- third-level institutions should give special attention to the needs of mature students
- third-level institutions should do more to close the gap between mature students' expectations and their experiences
- open and distance learning is an attractive option, especially as an alternative to part-time on-campus study.

Chapter 2. The Policy Context and the Targeted Initiative

1. The proportion of mature students in Ireland, when compared with most developed countries, is low. The official statistics may well, however, overstate the differences (paragraph 2.3).
2. Fees are waived for full-time students but part-time students, with some exceptions, are liable for them. This must inhibit their recruitment (paragraphs 2.12 – 2.16). **We recommend that consideration be given to reducing the differences faced by full and part-time students in respect of fees policy and financial support (BPG 7).**
3. By October 2002, the number of 18 year olds will have dropped by 8,500 or 12% from its peak. Between 2002 and 2007 there will have been a further decline of 12,000, another 20% drop. This will present the third-level of education with a severe recruitment problem (paragraph 2.17).

4. There is a reservoir of qualified potential mature students. Many who did not qualify are of the requisite ability to do so as second chance students. The level of mature demand is not fully reflected in the enrolments achieved (paragraphs 2.20, 2.22).
5. The population of mature students is changing and the changes need to be monitored (paragraph 2.21). **We recommend that such monitoring be carried out jointly between higher education institutions and the HEA to ensure inter-institutional consistency (BPGs 3 & 4).**
6. There are no clear models of mature access and treatment that can be drawn from other European experience. The HEA targeted initiative does put Ireland ahead of most countries in respect of attempts to build up mature student access (paragraph 2.31).

Chapter 3. National Policies.

7. Increasing mature student access is perceived as a key policy objective and this is reflected in statutory provisions (paragraph 3.1).
8. The Higher Education Authority has addressed the issue through a range of activities (paragraph 3.2).
9. The policy issues are thus well explored in the official and academic literature (paragraphs 3.4 – 3.7) which:
 - makes a strong case for extra places to accommodate more mature students and proposes a quota for second chance students
 - contains a clear indication of the need to emphasise part-time and other more flexible forms of delivery
 - argues for a change in the financial basis on which mature students may complete their third-level education
 - proposes the strengthening of alternative access routes (including accreditation of prior and experiential learning - APEL)
 - suggests the streamlining of applications procedure and criteria
 - advances the need for adult friendly institutional policies and support mechanisms.

Part II: The HEA Targeted Initiative on Mature Student Access

Chapter 4. The Initiative and Provisions for Mature Students

Nature of the initiative

10. The HEA does not seek to prescribe detailed modes of actions to grant recipients. Institutions are free to try out a variety of schemes (paragraph 4.4).
11. The sums specifically added by institutions to targeted initiative funding are not separately identified; they vary between institutions (paragraph 4.6).
12. Most institutional statements express some commitment to promoting mature student access, sometimes in general statements about widening access and provision for hitherto underrepresented groups (paragraph 4.9).

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13. Almost all institutions were already working with mature students before the initiative was launched and accordingly it is, implicitly or explicitly, integrated with other activities (paragraph 4.10).
 14. The sums granted through the initiative are relatively modest. They have been used to some effect in that they have:
 - allowed the appointment of dedicated staff who act as access or mature student officers
 - caused some institutions to bring under review selection procedures for mature students
 - allowed some institutions to introduce particular courses adapted to the needs of mature students (paragraph 4.13).
 15. The initiative is less successful in the following respects:
 - in many institutions, it has not led to systematic planning, to include revisions of mission statements, operational plans, budget allocations and staff training to accommodate the needs of mature students
 - there is no institution-wide consideration of educational style and delivery appropriate to mature students (although many students do not seek different treatment)
 - in most institutions, the benefits experienced by full-time students exceed those derived by part-time students
 - some universities have not increased their offer of part-time and distance education as a way to securing the admission of more mature students
 - training is not generally in place to help academic staff address the teaching and learning issues raised by the presence of mature students
 - it is unclear whether there has been a substantial increase in the extent of out-reach work, in addition to that already on offer, that can be traced to the initiative (paragraph 4.14).

Planning and resources

16. The following points are relevant to institutional planning and the use of resources:
 - the most important gaps in relevant action are in strategic planning for mature access, studentships or other financial support, consideration of the educational style and delivery, flexibility of provision, part-time and distance education (paragraph 4.15). **We recommend that higher education institutions give consideration to these issues (BPG 26)**
 - a minority of institutions provide resources for the initiative from their own funds. Mature students usually engender unspecified costs (paragraph 4.16)
 - the unit funding system has a number of features that seem to be inhibiting the growth of part-time courses (paragraph 4.17)
 - some institutions are likely to back continuation of activities under the initiative but not all institutions could be certain about continuation if central funding ceased (paragraph 4.20 – 4.21). We note, however, that the HEA has recently established the possibility of continuity of initiative funding
 - courses devised jointly by employers and institutes rather than attempts to recruit mature students to university courses may better meet the skills shortages (paragraph 4.23)
 - institutional responsibility for the initiative and for policy on mature students is managed in various ways. The level of ultimate responsibility is towards the top of the hierarchy; it is

connection between the university and the departments and other units that may still need strengthening (paragraph 4.24). **We recommend that higher education institutions give consideration to ways in which units and staff can be encouraged to take on board issues relating to mature students (BPG 28)**

- the novelty and added value of the initiative rest in the implication of national support and in the ability it confers among other things to make committed appointments of access officers, and mature student officers and to start preparatory courses (paragraphs 4.26 & 4.27)
- all of the institutions have long received mature students although they were rarely identified as a separate target group. There are many examples of courses suitable for mature students already being provided (paragraphs 4.28 & 4.29).

Connections and marketing

- many of the nine institutions have links with other education sectors; some, but not all, have arisen from targeted initiatives (paragraph 4.30)
- it is often difficult for people in settings remote from higher education to fully grasp the possibilities of securing access (paragraph 4.31)
- institutions' attempts to market the opportunities open to mature students are variable and often insufficient. However, some institutions made considerable efforts and employ a range of marketing procedures (paragraphs 4.32 – 4.34)
- a more vigorous nation-wide campaign through the media is thought necessary by many students. Television and other advertising encouraging applicants should refer to applicants other than school leavers. Local, institutional publicity is also needed. These efforts will be effective if only made as part of a more holistic effort including the setting of institutional and departmental targets and a clear plan of action with a publicity budget attached to it (paragraph 4.35) **We recommend that national agencies and higher education institutions give consideration to more effective publicity at national level (BPG 13).**

Preparatory courses and accreditation and transfer

- preparatory courses are a significant and appreciated feature of the targeted initiative in some, but not all, of the institutions (paragraph 4.36)
- some academic staff believe, however, that access work can be best undertaken in institutions below those of the third-level and that universities should work with further education institutions to that end (paragraph 4.42)
- different preparatory courses have different forms of accreditation and academic units have different approaches to selection (paragraph 4.43). Students completing such courses should be able to transfer to institutions offering the course sought after (paragraph 4.44). However, Ireland has not yet established a credit transfer system, although there are plans to do so under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 (paragraph 4.52). **We recommend that a national course credit scheme be created and transfer between institutions established and that accreditation and access procedures be standardised (BPGs 11 & 12)**
- there are felt to be problems with the CAO application form on which some mature students apply. A special form for mature student applications is thought to be needed (paragraph 4.48). **We recommend that consideration should be given to this issue by CAO and higher education institutions (BPG 14).**

Support

- orientation and support given to mature students on entry to undergraduate life are critical to their ability to assimilate well to university work and to reconcile it with their other obligations (paragraph 4.53). **We recommend that higher education institutions give full support to**

units and staff concerned with educational, counselling and social support to students (BPG 30)

- almost everywhere, child-care facilities are a problem (paragraphs 4.54 – 4.56). **We recommend that higher education institutions give consideration to better child-care facilities for mature students with children (BPG 31)**
- counselling and support systems do have a mediating role (paragraph 4.63)
- staffing practices do not reflect the needs of out-reach programmes such as the time needed for extra support required by students, and the additional travelling time for staff. Nor is remuneration for extra work adequate (paragraph 4.64). **We recommend that higher education institutions give consideration to providing academic staff with adequate recognition for time dedicated to courses in outlying areas (BPG 34).**

Chapter 5. Student Experience of Courses

17. The nature of the educational experience emerges as salient. The issues are: the style of education on offer; the extent to which content was changing; the shift towards more continuous assessment; shifts in organisation: modular, and distance education courses (paragraphs 5.1, 5.9, 5.14).
18. Students and faculty do not expect the higher education experience to be altered for the sake of mature students. At the same time, universities are opening up to new approaches to education (paragraph 5.3).
19. Contributions by the initiative towards other HEA objectives are likely to come about indirectly through learning support or through developments keyed in by teaching and learning units where they exist (paragraph 5.3).
20. Mature students are generally treated the same as other students (paragraph 5.5). The general view is that 18/19 year-old students benefit from the presence of mature students (paragraph 5.28).
21. Most mature students express considerable satisfaction with their courses and general treatment. Some students, however, present a formidable list of academic problems (paragraphs 5.16 - 5.17). **We recommend that institutions and their departments and academic staff examine admission criteria and procedures and arrangements for teaching and learning (BPGs 32 & 36 - 40).**
22. Students may need reassurance about their capacity to succeed. Support from academic staff varies and problems are minimised where there is a strong departmental personal tutor system (paragraphs 5.4 – 5.7).
23. Staffing ratios make academic staff hard pressed (paragraphs 5.5 – 5.7) and make it difficult to offer repeat sessions for students (paragraph 5.18). **We recommend that higher education institutions with support from the HEA give consideration to improving staffing ratios (perhaps made possible by reduced numbers of students) (BPG 35).**
24. Some areas of central administration are thought to lack attention to the needs of mature students. The problems may be accentuated for part-time students. At the same time we encountered administrators strongly committed to mature student access and meeting their needs (paragraph 5.8)
25. Aspects of work with mature students might benefit from staff development (paragraph 5.15). **We recommend that higher education institutions and relevant national bodies give consideration to the provision of staff training directed to the concerns of mature students and new ways of learning (BPGs 19 & 33).**
26. Some examples of courses suited to mature students are noted (paragraph 5.10). Some subjects demand pre-requisite knowledge which most mature students are unlikely to have. **We recommend that higher education institutions and their departments and academic staff critically examine admissions**

criteria and curriculum (BPGs 36 & 37). We also recommend that consideration be given to the funding of a more comprehensive range of preparatory courses (BPGs 16 & 18).

27. Flexibility in the delivery of courses will be necessary if Ireland is to recruit many more mature students. There are good examples of part-time and distance education provided for them, but the need to provide adequately for part-time students is not fully taken on board in many institutions. Reference to part-time students in our interviews was rare (paragraphs 5.25 - 5.26). **We recommend that institutions and their departments and faculty are encouraged to move towards more flexible curricula through modular systems and the development of mixed-mode courses involving a combination of open learning materials and face-to-face teaching (BPGs 20 & 41). We also recommend that the relationship between NDEC (Oscail) and higher education institutions is reviewed (BPG 21).**
28. For many mature students, part-time courses are preferred, or indeed the only means by which they can participate in higher education. There is some considerable discrepancy between the financial burdens faced by full and part-time students. In addition, the present funding methodology is such as to discourage the provision of courses that provide students with greater flexibility than that allowed by traditional full and part-time courses (paragraph 5.26). **We recommend that consideration be given to reducing the differences faced by full and part-time students in respect of fees policy and financial support and that the funding methodology be reviewed to allow the funding of courses that provide students with flexible study arrangements including courses whose duration are less than an academic year (BPGs 7 & 9).**
29. Examples of success rates for mature students are encouraging (paragraph 5.32). Institutions should routinely collect data showing success and drop-out rates in a nationally consistent form, across the two third-level systems, and they should distinguish between those with and those without school leaving certificates. Such data should enable institutions and the HEA to make use of relevant indicators (paragraph 5.30). **We recommend that higher education institutions (including all major providers of part-time courses, such as the Open University) in collaboration with HEA consider the collection of comprehensive data on a routine basis (BPGs 4 & 22).**
30. Whilst institutions keep records of the employment destinations of full-time graduates, most institutions are not able to identify employment destinations by graduates' age. For the most part, faculty felt that mature students do well enough in their courses to take their place with other graduates in the labour market (paragraph 5.33).

Chapter 6. Social and Financial Concerns of Mature Students

31. Our evidence supports that of other studies, namely, that support for full-time mature students is inadequate and even less adequate for part-time students, the recruitment of whom is essential for the success of the mature access policy. More detailed conclusions are:
- accounts of mature student hardship and difficulty are detailed and sustained (paragraph 6.1)
 - distance and physical access are often a problem (paragraph 6.2)
 - women with children are far less likely than other possible entrants to take up higher education (paragraph 6.3).
32. Financial concerns weigh heavily on many students (although some are retired people well able to cope) (paragraph 6.4) including dependence on spouse's income (paragraph 6.5) and relying on the support of their parents (paragraph 6.8).
33. There are said to be unfilled places on evening part-time degree courses because of fees. The harsher fees regime faced by part-time students is, but only to a limited extent, mitigated by the fact that they can claim tax relief on fees, but the relief is available only at the standard rate of 22% (paragraph 6.8). **We recommend that consideration be given to reducing the differences faced by full and part-time students in respect of fees policy and financial support (including child-care costs), and that tax relief should be better related to the position of mature students (BPGs 7 & 8). We also recommend that support be given for fees paid by distance education students on low incomes, including those on courses offered by accredited providers from outside the state (BPG 23).**

Chapter 7. Evaluation by Institutions

34. Systematic self-evaluation of mature student access and progress seems essential if support for further initiatives is intended (paragraph 7.5). **We recommend that HEA should require institutions to systematically evaluate their initiative-related activities (BPG 25)**

Part III: The Student Survey

Chapters 8. Introduction, Background and Results

35. When drawing conclusions about the student survey, it is important to keep in mind the response rates to our questionnaire survey. However, we believe that the data collected, from those mature students on courses in third-level institutions, provide sufficient evidence to enable the following conclusions to be made:
- the high proportion of respondents who possess Leaving Certificates suggests that many mature students could be described as delayed entrants rather than those who had had to overcome a poor school experience
 - the main reasons for mature students – both full and part-time – returning to education are career-related
 - financial issues – the need and/or desire to earn money – were the significant reasons provided by respondents (both full and part-time) for not embarking on third-level study after completing their Leaving Certificates
 - financial issues continue to play a major role as the main barrier identified by respondents to becoming a mature student
 - the universities are not providing opportunities for mature students in those disciplines that are most closely related to the needs of the Irish economy. Moreover, those opportunities that are provided by third-level institutions need to be better promoted
 - both full and part-time respondents felt that third-level institutions should give special attention to the needs of mature students. For full-time mature students more help is required with study skills; for part-time mature students, flexibility in the timetable is important
 - more needs to be done by third-level institutions to close the gap, in relation to the needs of mature students, between expectations and delivery
 - opportunities to study through open and distance learning are a more attractive option for those respondents who are currently studying part-time than for those studying full-time.

Part IV: Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter 9. Conclusions and Recommendations

General conclusions

The target of 10,000 additional mature student places is achievable in terms of the numbers available in the general population. Measures must be taken, based upon careful institutional survey and planning, to achieve the target

The initiative has succeeded in raising consciousness of the mature access issue. It has provided seed-corn funds enabling institutions to experiment fairly freely in ways of attracting and providing appropriately for mature students. It could not of itself shift the access proportion from 5 to 15%. It could, however, help set the policies, procedures and people in place to begin to approach that task.

The conclusions and recommendations highlighted in this Executive Summary form part of the Best Practice Guidelines (see page 121). The Guidelines offer additional recommendations informed by our discussions, our survey of the literature and practice elsewhere.

Part I: Methods and Policies

CHAPTER 1. PURPOSES, ISSUES AND METHODS

- 1.1 The targeted initiative taken by the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) towards improving access for mature students (see notes on definitions at the end of this Chapter) seeking admission to third-level education represents a notable attempt to help institutions to face a key area of policy and practice development. This would not prove to be an easy task. The remarkable expansion of the system, most particularly since the 1980s, was predicated, as in other countries, on the need to accommodate the increasing numbers of qualified young people leaving school. The result was a system largely depending on traditional ways of recruiting, admitting and educating students. As we shall see, to meet the demands of equity and the need for more trained human resources by recruiting mature students requires yet further shifts in financial policies affecting student recruitment and in institutional practices in admissions and education. At the outset, however, we should note (see paragraph 2.3) that the Irish record in recruiting mature students has been understated, although some of the objectives underlying the policy are only partly being met.
- 1.2 We were asked to make two separate, but interlocking, studies on the access and provision for mature students in Irish higher education. The first would involve a survey to obtain a profile of particular targeted groups and to seek their views on existing provision and on possible developments of places for mature students. The second would be an evaluation of the Higher Education Authority's targeted initiative in the area of mature student access. The two studies are to provide a basis for the HEA in advising the Department of Education and Science (DES) on the demand for mature student places. The research was undertaken during the period December 2000 to April 2001.

The methods used

- 1.3 The evaluation of the targeted initiative on access for mature students (Part II) was intended to:
- (i) assess the effectiveness of the measures to which the funding contributes and to establish what additional measures may be needed to improve effectiveness
 - (ii) consider other possible approaches to encouraging increased participation by mature students in the context of the tightening labour market (e.g., flexibility of provision, part-time, open and distance learning, supports for students after entry) and to recommend how the initiative could be developed to assist these approaches
 - (iii) undertake a brief overview of initiatives undertaken in some other countries
 - (iv) make recommendations on the conditions of funding of access courses (e.g., certification, progression)
 - (v) develop appropriate indicators
 - (vi) produce a best practice guideline.
- 1.4 We began our study with a survey of the policy context, which was underpinned by an analysis of the work undertaken for the HEA by other researchers, as well as official and academic literature on policies on mature student access. We visited the seven Irish universities, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MIC) and St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin (SPD). Two of us spent a day in each institution where we interviewed the president and/or senior members of faculty and administration, and other members of staff closely concerned with recruitment, admission, and provision of services for and teaching of mature students. Lists of those met can be found in Appendix 2. We also conducted ten meetings with groups of mature students, usually eight in number, from different subject areas and from different stages of their courses, in all of the institutions.
- 1.5 The study was essentially qualitative in method. Our visits extended our perception of the issues and enabled us to test original assumptions, even if we could not lay claim to uncovering the full range of academic, administrative and managerial and student perspectives. We used an open schedule of questions; a copy of them was sent in advance to institutions so that they might have some forewarning of our concerns.

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- 1.6 We conducted 77 interviews and meetings with administrative and academic staff. Sessions were tape recorded with the agreement of the participants. To preserve anonymity, these were not transcribed individually but contributed to the data for each institution which fed into this report. In addition to institutional contacts, we held meetings, either face-to-face or by telephone, with some of the national bodies concerned with the admission and education of mature students. Regrettably, this process was abbreviated by the travel restrictions resulting from the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in the UK. We put together the evidence from the interviewees and institutional documentation.
- 1.7 We have to note the limitations of our findings. Under current legislation, the institutes of technology are not funded under the targeted initiative; accordingly, the evaluation did not cover them although they complement the work of universities in coverage of different client groups. The majority of mature students in the Irish Republic are part-time and are studying outside the universities (see paragraph 2.1).
- 1.8 It was also pointed out to us in some institutions that initiative-funded activities had only just got underway; whilst this study can inspect the logic, intentions and arrangements of such an initiative, at this stage its impacts must be largely inferred. Moreover, actions taken under the initiative are not easily separated from what is already being offered to mature students, many of which pre-date the targeted initiative and can be indistinguishable from activities undertaken with the general body of students. It is thus conceptually difficult to separate the evaluation of the activities that were funded directly by the targeted initiative from an evaluation of the larger activities which have been enhanced through the resources made available by the additional funding. Notwithstanding these reservations, however, we feel that we have secured from those working in the institutions enough information and statements of views to help steer further this policy movement.

The student survey

- 1.9 The student survey began with the design and dispatch of survey questionnaires to be sent to samples of applicants, successful and unsuccessful, for the academic year 2000/01, for places in the seven universities, two colleges, both of which offer BEd and BA degrees, namely, St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin (SPD) and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MIC), the 14 institutes of technology, the National College of Art and Design, the National College of Ireland, and to a sample of six Vocational Education Committees (VECs) – City of Dublin, Laois, Leitrim, Galway, Mayo and Waterford). Separate questionnaires were sent to samples of applicants in the following categories:
- successful applicants for full-time undergraduate mature student places (i.e., those who applied through the CAO and those who were required to apply directly to certain universities)
 - unsuccessful applicants for full-time undergraduate mature student places (i.e., those who applied through the CAO and those who were required to apply directly to certain universities)
 - successful applicants for part-time undergraduate mature student places – both campus and off-campus
 - unsuccessful applicants for part-time undergraduate mature student places – both campus and off-campus
 - mature students taking part in preparatory courses (i.e., access, foundation, return to learning and VTOS courses)
 - mature students taking part in Post-Leaving Certificate courses.
- 1.10 The survey involved seeking substantial help from the Central Applications Office (CAO), institutions and VECs in identifying samples of students. Because of the exigencies of the data protection legislation, the CAO were only able to send us anonymised lists of successful and unsuccessful mature applicants to full-time third-level education. From these data, we were only able to take random 1 in 5 samples rather than stratified samples. In terms of the institutions, data protection legislation also meant that we depended on their good offices to select the individual students and post the questionnaires for return directly to us. To help institutions in this task, we produced detailed guidelines. Initially, we asked for a representative 1 in 5 sample ensuring groups of mature students from different genders, age ranges, country, nationality and residential origin, and socio-economic class as well as information on previous qualifications, career history, and disability, if any. Selection proved to be a laborious business and, throughout this exercise, the safe delivery of letters proved to be an exigent test of postal services. Some letters sent to institutions are said to have never arrived and this delayed our timetable considerably. In addition, many institutions told us that their data collection systems could not provide a representative sample or that they were

considerably hard pressed to free up staff time to perform the task we required. Consequently, the majority of samples were random and in some cases questionnaires were given out in lectures.

- 1.11 In the event, 2074 questionnaires were dispatched and 391 returned, a rate not unusual in this kind of study and in this case affected by the particularly low return from unsuccessful applicants for admission. However, those institutions whose response rates from students were particularly low were asked to send the questionnaires again in an attempt to increase the numbers returned. This resulted in an additional 165 completed questionnaires and an improved response rate of 27%. Completed questionnaires were coded by a specialist outside agency; the answers to the open questions, however, were analysed by the team members.
- 1.12 The questionnaires were intended to seek:
- a profile of the groups targeted by the survey
 - students' views about their reasons for coming to higher education as mature students
 - their views on the barriers to participation
 - their perception of the recruitment and selection processes if granted admission
 - their views on the appropriateness of existing provision of places for mature students in Ireland and on possible developments in the provision of places and on their experience of higher education.
- 1.13 Examples of the questionnaires - those for successful and unsuccessful applicants - are reproduced in Appendix 3. We were able to pilot them at group meetings with students at the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and University College, Galway.

A note on definitions

In referring to 'undergraduate courses', we mean those courses recognised as being at third-level and thus include those leading to certificate, diploma and degree qualifications. In discussing 'preparatory courses', we are referring to those courses whose aim includes preparing potential students for entry to third-level study. Such courses will thus include access, foundation, Post-Leaving Certificate, return to learning and VTOS courses. In referring to part-time courses, we include those which are studied on a part-time basis during the day, as well as the more abundant evening courses.

The general definition of 'mature students' in Ireland covers all those students who are 23 years of age or over on 1 January of the year of entering third-level study. However, within this broad category, there is a more detailed typology which is widely recognised by policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers. For example, the Review Committee on Post Secondary Education and Training Places (1999, p 78) referred to second chance students as 'those who, for reasons of social or economic disadvantage, were unable to avail of higher education as school leavers'. It also stated that mature students fall into a number of categories:

- those students entering higher education for the first time on full-time or part-time undergraduate courses
- those undertaking continuing education, either full or part-time, on undergraduate, postgraduate or specially designed courses for employment related reasons to upgrade their skills, knowledge and so on.

CHAPTER 2. THE POLICY CONTEXT AND THE TARGETED INITIATIVE

Numbers of mature students

- 2.1 We face some difficulty in identifying the numbers of mature students in universities and the two colleges funded by the HEA. Institutional counts of them are not all made on the same basis. Part-time students are sometimes treated differently for registration and for data collection purposes. Data collected for full and part-time students should be on a consistent basis. We encountered universities in which the number of full-time mature undergraduate students was small but which provided part-time and evening courses leading to many Masters and other post-experience qualifications. However, the Review Committee on Post Secondary Education and Training Places reported that most mature students (75%) study part-time in publicly-funded higher education institutions and they form the majority of this sector; in 1996/97 the number of third-level part-time students in publicly-funded higher education institutions was 22,800. By contrast, the intake of mature students to full-time third-level courses was just under 5% (1,500) of all entrants. This compared with 24% in the UK (Review Committee, 1999).
- 2.2 Table 2.1, on the following page, gives figures of mature student entrants (defined here as 24 years and over) to full-time undergraduate study by HEA institutions since 1989. It will also be seen from the Table that the proportion of mature student entrants in Ireland is relatively low and varies between institutions. The figure for Ireland is 7% (1999/2000) whilst those for some OECD countries are considerably higher - although these comparative figures need to be treated with caution (see paragraph 2.3).
- 2.3 The comparisons, however, may well overstate the differences. As we have noted, in Ireland a mature student is normally defined as one who enters third-level education after the 23rd birthday. Other countries assume students come to maturity earlier. In the UK, for example, the cut off is 21 years. Moreover, it appears that the Irish statistics are based on a more stringent definition of higher education than is employed in other countries. In the case of the universities which we visited the proportions of mature students on full-time courses were, if account is taken of the differences in definition, not out of line with many comparable universities in the UK*.
- 2.4 Nonetheless, the figures are comparatively low, but for understandable reasons. The percentage of the Irish population under 25 was higher than in most EU countries; it is not surprising that pressure for places should come from the schools. As with other countries, until recently there was not a policy impetus towards the recruitment of second chance learners. Because of a weak labour market and low demands on it, there was no need to increase the stock of skilled adults. But in the last ten years this has changed. Any advantage created by the slight increase in the birth rate is offset by skill shortages.

* The percentage of mature students (defined as being over 21) entrants to full-time undergraduate courses in 1998-99 in the Universities of Cambridge, Birmingham, Leicester, Newcastle upon Tyne, Warwick, and in the London School of Economics and Imperial College varied between 3 and 6% (HEFCE, 1999). These figures throw the Irish record into relief.

Table 2.1 Age of full-time undergraduate new entrants to HEA institutions[^]

Year	1989/1990				1994/1995				1999/2000							
	AGE*	16-23	%	24+	%	Total	16-23	%	24+	%	Total	16-23	%	24+	%	Total
University College Dublin (UCD)		2,664	96%	115	4%	2,779	3,142	96%	119	4%	3,261	3,337	98%	77	2%	3,414
University College Cork (UCC)		1,570	97%	54	3%	1,624	2,070	91%	196	9%	2,266	2,444	91%	251	9%	2,695
NUI Galway (NUIG)		1,242	97%	39	3%	1,281	1,348	97%	43	3%	1,391	1,978	94%	127	6%	2,105
NUI Maynooth (NUIM)		633	93%	49	7%	682	849	90%	91	10%	940	1,059	89%	127	11%	1,186
Trinity College Dublin (TCD)		1,636	94%	105	6%	1,741	1,827	92%	162	8%	1,989	2,418	91%	245	9%	2,663
Dublin City University (DCU)		531	96%	22	4%	553	977	95%	51	5%	1,028	1,544	93%	109	7%	1,653
St. Patrick's, Drumcondra		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	434	88%	58	12%	492
University of Limerick (UL)		765	99%	11	1%	776	1,853	96%	82	4%	1,935	1,772	96%	83	4%	1,855
Mary Immaculate College		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	494	94%	33	6%	527
National College of Art & Design		114	95%	6	5%	120	134	89%	16	11%	150	140	90%	16	10%	156
Thomond College of Education**		107	96%	5	4%	112	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Royal College of Surgeons in Ire.		139	91%	14	9%	153	132	92%	12	8%	144	156	74%	56	26%	212
TOTAL		9,401	96%	420	4%	9,821	12,332	94%	772	6%	13,104	15,776	93%	1,182	7%	16,958

[^] Data not available for non-HEA institutions

* On 1 January post-enrolment A mature student is generally defined as one who is 23 years or over on January pre-enrolment.

** Integrated into UL in 1991

Source: Data provided by the Higher Education Authority, 2001

- 2.5 The recruitment of mature students to higher education is a salient issue in Ireland for four main reasons. First, there are considerations of equity. Intergenerational inequality was created by the inability of many families to allow their children to stay in school, and then seek admission to higher education. Until 1967 payment of fees was required for secondary education, and this must have inhibited the access of many able children. The government introduced free tuition for undergraduates in publicly funded third-level institutions with full effect from 1996/97. As Patrick Clancy (Clancy, 2000) has shown, the chances of school leavers of previous generations entering higher education are differentiated according to social class, although the issue of access of mature students is not entirely subsumed in the issue of social disadvantage. There are many who may not have gone into higher education for cultural background or family attitudinal reasons who are not now, and possibly were not in the past, socially disadvantaged.
- 2.6 There are significant regional variations in terms of the percentages of the population holding third-level qualifications. Table 2.2 shows by county the percentages of the population aged 15 or over holding third-level qualifications.

Table 2.2 Percentages of the population aged 15 or over holding third-level qualifications by county

<i>Percentage with third-level qualifications</i>	<i>Counties</i>
12	Offaly
13	Laois, Longford, Wexford, Leitrim, Cavan, Donegal, Monaghan
14	Tipperary, Mayo, Roscommon
15	Carlow, Louth
16	Kilkenny, Westmeath, Kerry, Waterford
18	Meath, Clare, Limerick
19	Cork, Sligo
21	Kildare, Wicklow, Galway
24	Dublin

Source: Central Statistics Office, Census 96, Volume 8, Table 3A

- 2.7 It can be seen that the Dublin percentage is twice as high as the county exhibiting the lowest percentage, Offaly, and almost twice as high as 11 counties where the percentages are 14% or less. There are significant variations within the county of Dublin; the percentage for Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown being 38%, while the figure for South Dublin is 19%. A similar pattern emerges from an examination of the regional figures; Table 2.3 shows for each region the numbers who have completed their education and the percentages of those who hold bachelor degrees and above and non-degree third-level qualifications.

Table 2.3 Persons who have completed their education by region and third-level qualifications

<i>Regional Authority Area</i>	<i>Number whose education has ceased</i>	<i>Those holding third-level qualifications</i>		<i>Total third-level qualifications (%)</i>
		<i>Non-degree (%)</i>	<i>Degree (%)</i>	
Border	272,186	8.1	6.3	14.4
Dublin	723,906	10.3	14.0	24.3
Mid-East	224,996	10.5	9.4	19.9
Midland	135,445	7.6	6.2	13.8
Mid-West	209,802	9.1	8.1	17.2
South-East	262,445	8.2	6.5	14.7
South-West	365,763	9.3	9.3	18.6
West	232,524	8.7	9.0	17.7
State	2,427,067	9.3	9.8	19.0

Source: Central Statistics Office. Census 96, Volume 8, Table 2

- 2.8 In most regions, especially Border and South-East, the numbers holding non-degree qualifications are greater or approximately the same as those in possession of degrees, but in Dublin the reverse is true in that the numbers of degree holders exceed the holders of non-degree qualifications by nearly 40%. The figures do not reveal where the qualifications were gained and it is likely, given that about 50% of the university places are in Dublin, that many obtained their qualifications in places other than those in which they currently reside. We heard talk of the 'Dublin factor' and that the problems of provision in a rural community were not recognised either by some of the official studies or by policy makers. 'Exclusion, disadvantage and the need for access are not exclusively an urban phenomenon.' But there are always problems of securing equitable treatment to widely dispersed populations, particularly if the circumstances of mature students are such that they are most likely to make use of part-time rather than full-time courses.
- 2.9 Second, Ireland is short of qualified human resources to the extent, ironically in view of the country's historic role as an exporter of manpower, of becoming an immigration country. We will consider later how far recruitment of mature students and different types of courses might meet this problem (paragraphs 9.1 – 9.15).
- 2.10 A third reason is that the system has expanded so that the steep decline in numbers of school leavers will leave some recently created places unfilled.
- 2.11 Finally, there are many arguments concerning the desirability of fostering a fully educated society for its own sake and for allowing space for personal fulfilment through education. These are independent of, but need not be in conflict with, the economic arguments.

Student finance

- 2.12 The Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education (1995) noted the 'concessions under the Higher Education Grant Schemes for full-time mature students and lone parents, the extension of the schemes to mature students who obtain a place, without necessarily having required levels of attainment in the Leaving Certificate, and who meet the means test, and the arrangements whereby long-term unemployed may retain their benefits while in higher education' (10.10). It recommended that in addition to these measures, 'the particular needs of mature students from low income backgrounds should be taken into account in the ongoing review of student support schemes'. It also noted that mature students have specific financial problems emanating from family commitments, and in particular those relating to crèche facilities and child minding support. These should be addressed when considering appropriate grant support (10.11).
- 2.13 The Review Committee on Post Secondary Education and Training Places (1999) recommended that third-level provision for mature students needs to be increased to tackle under-provision in the past and to meet the needs of life long learning. This need should be met by an additional 10,000 places to be built

up over a period of years primarily through part-time courses and other flexible options such as distance learning. The Committee believed that the means through which under-representation should be tackled is to assign quotas within the overall level of provision, and supplemented by a range of financial and other support mechanisms.

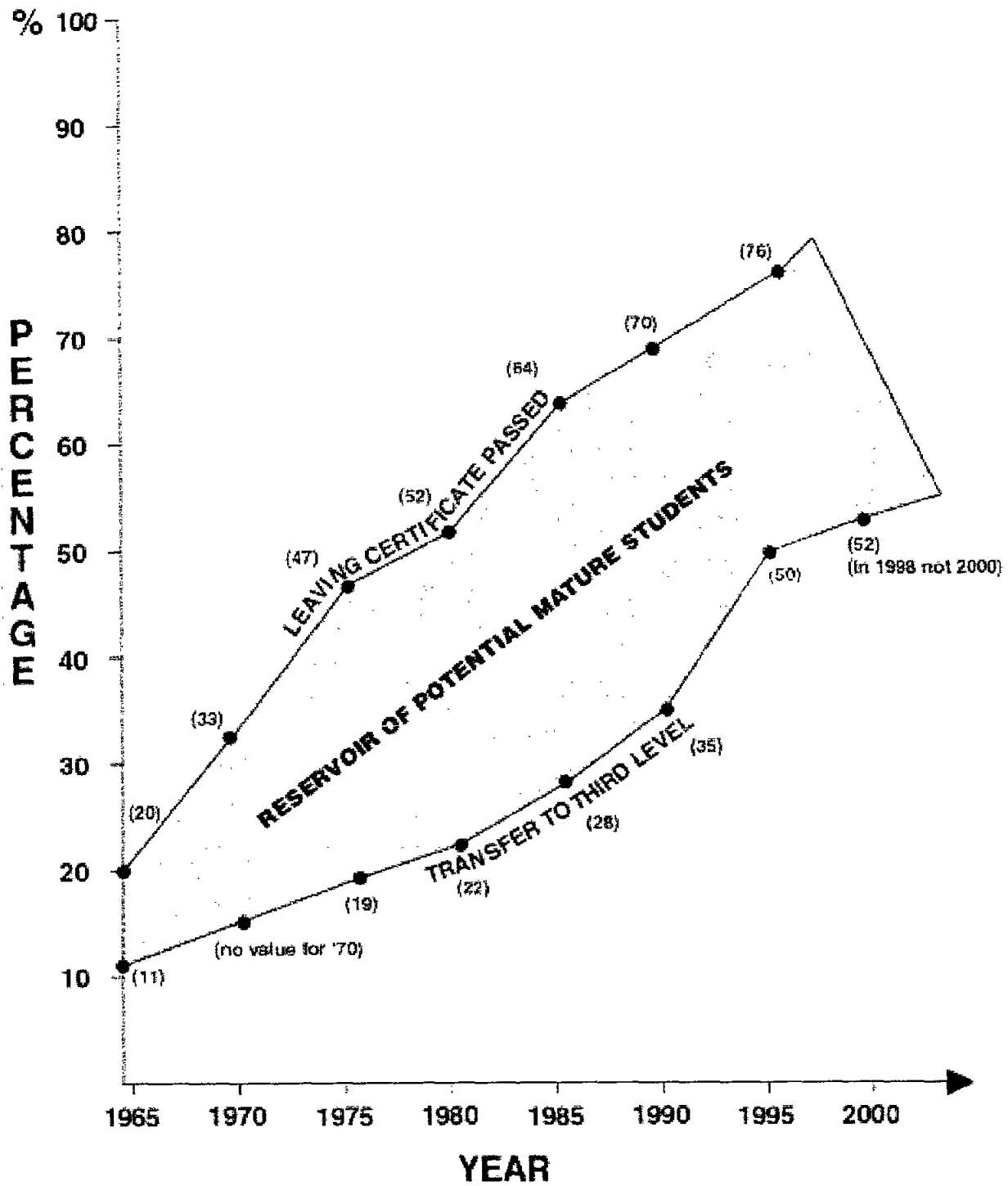
- 2.14 However, Skilbeck and Connell (2000) pointed out that ‘increased provision for mature age students does not of itself provide extra places for the socially and economically disadvantaged. Additional measures are needed’ (p 10). Measures might include ‘better procedures for credit recognition and transfer, access courses, alternative entry arrangements, improved status and recognition of vocational courses, linkages between public and private providers, and involvement of the employment sector, franchising, financial incentives and support, and the establishment of partnerships among providers as in distance education consortia’ (p 10).
- 2.15 The *White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life* (2000) took note of these messages and recommendations, and proposed the introduction of a targeted higher education mature student fund to rise to at least £10m a year ‘to enable third-level institutions to make innovative strategic shifts towards adult-friendly policies’ (p 19). ‘A key focus on the fund will be on increasing participation of disadvantaged mature students in third-level education’ (p 143). The White Paper also stated that ‘fees will no longer apply to third-level part-time students who are means-tested social welfare or unemployment payment recipients or dependants, medical card holders or dependants, or Family Income Supplement holders or dependants’ (p 19). These issues were also tackled in the recently published plan of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education (2001) as outlined below.
- 2.16 The *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education* (July 2001) has recommended that significantly increased maintenance grants should be paid to third-level students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Another key recommendation is that a National Office be established to implement many of the report’s recommendations. When established, the National Office will also be responsible for allocating funding for initiatives to promote equity in access. The Group also recommends that each third-level institution should aim to set aside at least 15% of full-time undergraduate places in each faculty or department for mature students, and that there be recognition of entry routes other than through the Leaving Certificate.

Demography

- 2.17 The birth rate has fallen by one-third between 1980 and 1994. By October 2002, the number of 18 year olds will have dropped by 8,500 or 12% from its peak. Between 2002 and 2007 there will have been a further decline of 12,000, another 20% drop (Report of Action Group on Access to Third Level Education, 2001, pp 130-131). This will present the third-level of education as a whole with a severe recruitment problem, although a decline in the present high level of student numbers would have some beneficial effects such as improved student-teacher ratios.
- 2.18 It has been pointed out by Dr Garrett Fitzgerald (May, 1999) that the decline in applicants will fall unevenly on the two sectors:
- ‘... if some places are freed up by the impending demographic shift towards lower numbers of 18 year-olds, the impact of this is likely to be highly skewed, with vacancies occurring mainly in the IT sector. ... the suppressed demand is mainly for university places ... It seems entirely possible, therefore, that for years to come the drop in the 18 year old age cohort will have little or no impact upon the flow of school-leavers seeking university places ...’
- 2.19 It may well be that declining numbers will be experienced most sharply by the institutes of technology yet almost all of the universities are reporting a decline in mature student applications, particularly in certain disciplines. This is attributed to the demand for labour to be associated with the current success of the economy.
- 2.20 In considering the retrieval of missed opportunities, it is necessary to disaggregate the concept of the mature student. Some are qualified to enter the third-level by virtue of qualifications gained whilst still at school. Figure 2.1 below shows that between 1965 and 1999 the second level retention rate, as defined by those leaving second level with a Leaving Certificate, grew between 20% and 76%. Between 1965 and

1998, however, the rate of transfer to third-level education rose from 11% to 52%. There is thus a reservoir of qualified potential mature students. There must also be many who did not qualify but who would have been of the requisite ability to do so as second chance students, that is those who, for reasons of social or economic disadvantage, were unable to avail of higher education as school leavers. The Review Committee (1999, p 62) suggested a quota for second chance students within overall mature student provision. Skilbeck and Connell (2000, pp 37-39) quote the practices of other countries in making provision for second chance students and, as we have seen (paragraph 2.11), specify the several conditions necessary to enhance the opportunities for mature students to enter higher education. There are no equivalent Irish studies but the UK's Robbins Report (1963), building on the Crowther Report (1959), spoke of a 'widows cruze' (the pitcher in the Gospels that constantly replenished itself), on the basis of data secured from tests on those entering National Service which showed that among the sons of manual workers who left school early, there were many of high ability. The same point is confirmed by the sustained experience of the UK Open University in the success of entrants without qualifications. This must have been equally true of Ireland.

Figure 2.1 Reservoir of potential mature students: qualified school leavers 1965-1998



Source: Data provided by Department of Education and Science and Higher Education Authority, 2001

- 2.21 In any event, the population of mature students is changing and the changes need to be monitored. One college, St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin (SPD), has noted that during the years 1993-1996, over half of its mature entrants were aged 35 and under. Between 1998-2000 the age profile shifted; 56% of its mature entrants fell into the 36-55 age bracket. There was also a shift in the gender composition of the students, from 64% female in the 1993-1996 BA entrants to 75% female in the 1998-2000 BA entrants.
- 2.22 Whilst we must record that several interviewees in the institutions believed that there was not a substantial reservoir of potential adult students, at least for full-time courses, Clancy has shown (Clancy, 1999) that the level of mature demand is not fully reflected in the enrolments achieved. In the 1997 intake through CAO, 66% of all applicants received an offer, but only 50% of mature students did so. But 80% of the mature students who received an offer accepted it, compared with the overall acceptance rate of 75%. In comparison, CAO data for 2000/01 show that 55% of mature student applicants received an offer compared to 58% of all applicants. Of those mature applicants receiving an offer, 66% accepted it – the same percentage as the overall acceptance rate. Offers to, and acceptances by, mature students are now in line with the overall rates – possibly due to the targeted initiative. However, it is commonly accepted that the potential cohort of mature students is not as large as it was a few years ago because of the economic position. If there is a reservoir, its outflow is meagre.

Practices of other European countries

- 2.23 Comparisons with the policies and practices of other European countries are not easily made because they vary in the ages at which school leavers begin and end their third-level courses. In many countries, there is no clear distinction between full and part-time students who may be few in number, and fees are not charged to any student on a degree or other undergraduate level course.
- 2.24 Central and institutional encouragement of mature access can be compared on several dimensions: encouragement through publicity, support to students and institutions, flexible entry requirements, providing foundation and access courses, and providing educational fare appropriate to mature students.
- 2.25 Generally, there have been few policy moves or active national publicity campaigns encouraging the recruitment of mature students. Exceptions are Sweden, where they have long made special entry arrangements for students of 25 years or over, in the UK where recently universities have been given a 5% grant premium for students over 25 years, and Ireland whose policy declarations and targeted initiative have placed it ahead of most other countries. Indeed, in some countries there are disincentives to older students. Thus, in the Netherlands and Germany student funding ceases after the age of 30. In Greece, entry is highly competitive; access to its Open University (OU) has an upper age limit of 44 and requires formal educational qualifications.
- 2.26 In most countries, those seeking admission to full degree courses face tests which, without differentiation for age, constitute a relatively high hurdle. In France, and most German states, adults with job experience but without entry qualifications can follow first degree courses, but few do so. In France, they can have access to APEAL (accreditation of prior education, achievements and learning) but departments vary in their willingness to accept such students.
- 2.27 The mainly centrally regulated admission system in Sweden for many years has favoured mature at the expense of young students, in terms of availability of places (Kim, 1998). Admission for older students is facilitated by the '25-4 scheme' (for applicants lacking upper-secondary education or older than 25 years of age, with more than four years of work experience and competence in English and Swedish). Once admitted, however, mature students are treated in the same way as younger students. No fees are charged. About 50% of students are 30 years or older, or entered higher education studies at 25 or older. About 25% of the students are part-time and about 10% follow distance education. The government is trying to encourage the institutions to offer more part-time and distance education courses - but they are slow to respond, partly because the performance-based resource allocation system makes it costly for them to offer such opportunities.
- 2.28 In Spain, adults older than 25 years may enter without a secondary qualification, perhaps with special examinations to enter specific programmes. They can apply for a regular grant, but are unlikely to get one. Many are in employment and thus ineligible. There is no part-time status, though mature students

enrol for fewer credits, but this does not give them a special status. An admissions test is required for distance education and no allowance made for mature students. The Distance University with an enrolment of about 140,000 students takes most of the adult students. Of the total number of students (over 1.5 million), over 400,000 were 25 or older.

- 2.29 The UK stands out in its numbers of mature students who constituted 51% of the UK-domiciled first year undergraduate student body in 1999. Of those studying part-time, 66% were over the age of 30 (HESA, 2001). Other European students enter at a slightly older age than their UK counterparts but, with the possible exception of Sweden, there are hardly any mature students. Whilst the considerable growth in numbers of mature students in the UK cannot be ascribed to a concerted national initiative, full-time students are eligible for the student support in the same way as are other students, with some additional support funding for students over 25 on full-time courses.
- 2.30 In some countries there are claimed to be some movements in curriculum and modes of delivery to meet the needs of life long learning, but these cannot be generalised and are of uncertain robustness. Academics in more than one country maintain, however, that they require the same disciplinary basis to their studies as do other students.
- 2.31 It will thus be seen that there are no clear models of mature access and treatment that can be drawn from other European experience. Woodrow et al. (2000) have noted, in the broader context of life long learning, that 'of all the five official interpretations ... (i.e., of Finland, France, Ireland, Germany and the UK), it is ... that of Ireland which conveys the most hope and inspiration for the development of a 'social inclusion' model of higher education'. The targeted initiative does put Ireland ahead of most countries in respect of attempts to build up mature student access.

Conclusions and recommendations

- 2.32 The proportion of mature students in Ireland, when compared with most developed countries, is low. The official statistics may well, however, overstate the differences (paragraph 2.3).
- 2.33 Fees are waived for full-time students but part-time students, with some exceptions, are liable for them. This must inhibit their recruitment (paragraphs 2.12 – 2.16). **We recommend that consideration be given to reducing the differences faced by full and part-time students in respect of fees policy and financial support (BPG 7).**
- 2.34 By October 2002, the number of 18 year olds will have dropped by 8,500 or 12% from its peak. Between 2002 and 2007 there will have been a further decline of 12,000, another 20% drop. This will present the third-level education with a severe recruitment problem (paragraph 2.17).
- 2.35 There is a reservoir of qualified potential mature students. Many who did not qualify are of the requisite ability to do so as second chance students. The level of mature demand is not fully reflected in the enrolments achieved (paragraphs 2.20, 2.22).
- 2.36 The population of mature students is changing and the changes need to be monitored (paragraph 2.21). **We recommend that such monitoring be centrally directed in collaboration with higher education institutions (BPGs 3 & 4)**
- 2.37 There are no clear models of mature access and treatment that can be drawn from other European experience. The HEA targeted initiative does put Ireland ahead of most countries in respect of attempts to build up mature student access (paragraph 2.31).

CHAPTER 3. NATIONAL POLICIES

Legislation

3.1 Increasing mature student access is perceived as a key policy objective and this is reflected in statutory provisions. Section 3 of the Higher Education Authority Act, 1971, prescribes one of the functions of the HEA as 'promoting the attainment of equality of opportunity in higher education'. Under Section 12 of the Universities Act, 1997, universities are required 'to facilitate life long learning through the provision of adult and continuing education'. 'A governing authority shall ... promote access to the university ... by economically or socially disadvantaged people and by people from sections of society significantly under-represented in the student body' (Section 18) and 'prepare a statement of the policies of the university in respect of (a) access to the university and to university education by economically or socially disadvantaged people, by people who have a disability and by people from sections of society significantly under-represented in the student body, and (b) equality, including gender equality, in all activities of the university' and shall implement the policies set out in the statement (Section 36). Under Section 49, the HEA has an advisory and review role in relation to statements of equality and their implementation. Similar requirements are stated in the Regional Technical Colleges Act, 1992 and the Dublin Institute of Technology Act 1992. The Equal Status Act, 1999 includes age among the categories which must not be discriminated against and relates directly to 'a university or any other third-level or higher-level institution, whether or not supported by public funds'. The Employment Equality Act, 1998 forbids discrimination in entry to vocational training.

Actions of HEA

3.2 The Higher Education Authority has addressed the issue through a range of activities

- it has commissioned a study which gives an international perspective on equity and access in higher education (Skilbeck and Connell (2000) *Access and Equity in Higher Education: An International Perspective on Issues and Strategies*). This noted progress achieved but also that it was uneven. It noted five broadly defined groups featuring in the international equity debate: low socio-economic status; women and girls; mature age and part-time students; ethnic and other minority groups; people with a disability. The approaches included: securing sound information; focused attention on the most obdurate problems; comprehensive legislation and regulatory frameworks; setting clear goals and incentives and performance measurement; cross-sectoral policies and well defined needs-based funding. Strategies for higher education should be set within an 'educational equity chain', extending from early childhood to postgraduate education
- a further study evaluated the targeted initiative on widening access for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Osborne and Leith (2000) *Evaluation of the Targeted Initiative on Widening Access for Young People from Socio-economically Disadvantaged Backgrounds*)
- hosted a forum *Promoting Equity in Higher Education* (October 2000)
- since 1996 provided targeted funding for access initiatives to higher education
- advised the Minister on issues in relation to equity in higher education, for example, through an input into the work of the Action Group on Access to Higher Education and the Task Force on Life Long Learning.

3.3 All aspects of the mature learning experience were examined in the context of the White Paper, *Adult Education: Learning for Life* (July 2000) with a view to future legislation governing the area. It recommended a competitive Targeted Higher Education Mature Student Fund which, on a phased basis, would rise to £10m a year to increase mature student participation in higher education (pp 143–144). It noted and recognised the importance of distance education, and stated that the National Adult Learning Council and HEA should prioritise an exploration of 'mechanisms to provide financial support for initial course development work targeted at strategic areas, maximising the use of ICT and broadcasting in delivery (p 145). In the context of part-time fees, the White Paper does not recommend a general programme of free fees, except for those persons (and their dependants) who are medical cardholders,

recipients of the welfare/health payments or Family Income Supplement (pp 145–146) The National Development Plan (www.irish.ie/finance/publications/otherpubs/ndpindex.htm) identified as a funding priority, within the context of overall employment and human resource development, meeting particular and diverse needs of groups in society and the facilitation of life long learning, including the provision of accessible and flexible routes of progression between different sectors of the education system.

Literature on the issue

- 3.4 The mature student issue has attracted a wealth of policy and academic statements which bear witness to its current salience. To its credit, the Higher Education Authority has commissioned research studies which address the broad issue of disadvantage, and the Department of Education and Science has initiated major enquiries into the issue. We summarise here their main findings as the background to our own study.
- 3.5 The reasons adduced for a low rate of mature access are demographic, socio-economic factors and student finances. These include:
- high birth rates leading to large numbers of school leavers and high levels of emigration (Clancy, 1999)
 - retention of fees for part-time students (while those for full-time students were abolished) (White Paper, *Adult Education: Learning for Life*, 2000)
 - under-representation continues to be a problem, especially students from the lower socio-economic groups, with disabilities and some ethnic minorities (others include women, mature and part-time students). Barriers are financial support and the prevailing ‘cultural norms’ in universities (Skilbeck and Connell, 2000)
 - financial support and the prevailing ‘cultural norms’ in universities (Lynch, 1997; Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998; Skilbeck and Connell, 2000)
 - while Ireland is average for recruitment to the tertiary level, it is significantly below average for the upper secondary level (*Report of the Review Committee on Post Secondary Education and Training Places*, 1999).
- 3.6 Additional places for mature students may not be enough. Skilbeck and Connell (2000) point out that those of mature age most likely to (re)enter higher education ‘have successfully completed secondary education, may also have tertiary level qualifications, are established in a career and seek professional advancement ... Increased provision for mature age students does not of itself provide extra places for the socially and economically disadvantaged. Additional measures are needed’ (p 10). Measures might include ‘better procedures for credit recognition and transfer, access courses, alternative entry arrangements, improved status and recognition of vocational courses, linkages between public and private providers, and involvement of the employment sector, franchising, financial incentives and support, and the establishment of partnerships among providers as in distance education consortia’ (p 10).
- 3.7 The proposals for action made in the policy and academic literature can be grouped as concerned with:
- (i) numbers
 - (ii) national and strategic policy
 - (iii) finance
 - (iv) institutional action
 - (v) entry routes, accreditation and access
 - (vi) data collation
 - (vii) study conditions and support.
- (i) *Numbers*
- investment in third-level places leading to 114,000 full-time places in 2001 would allow Ireland to make undergraduate provision for traditional school leavers

- by 2005, third-level institutions should be setting aside a quota of mature students of at least 15% (*Commission on the Points System, Final Report and Recommendations*, 1999, p 115) that is, 10,000 places, to be built up over a period of years (Review Committee, 1999, p 2), primarily through part-time courses, for at least 80% of admissions (*White Paper, Adult Education: Learning for Life*, 2000) and other flexible options such as distance learning
- by 2015, this target might be raised to 25% - to bring Ireland closer to the average participation rate in OECD countries. With some exceptions, the 15% quota should apply to all courses, and to those mature students 'who are assessed other than on the basis of their school-leaving qualification' (*Commission on the Points System*, 1999, p 115-6)
- before places are provided, demand should be validated by appropriate market research on the target population to determine the extent of demand, the courses sought and the most appropriate method of provision (Review Committee, 1999)
- at present more than 80% of places occupied by mature students are part-time places. The proportion of flexible places within additional provision should be at this level (Review Committee, 1999).

(ii) *National and strategic policy*

- whilst universities responded positively to a targeted initiative to facilitate the participation of school leavers from less well off backgrounds, it was now appropriate to consider a more coherent national approach. The HEA should establish a reporting mechanism for institutions with clear performance indicators and consult universities about the development of a national framework for improving the current situation (Osborne and Leith, 2000, pp 29-31)
- second chance education could provide a solution to the problems of skills shortages and unemployment (Clancy, 2000; *Commission on the Points System*, 1999), to help those seeking second chance education and to redress the balance towards a more equitable and inclusive society. This implied a cultural shift from stressing the importance of immediate entry to third-level for school leavers (*Commission on the Points System*, 1999)
- increased flexibility, including part-time and distance learning, workplace delivery, and mechanisms for the accreditation of prior learning and work based experience will be essential in making provision for mature students' (Review Committee, 1999; *White Paper, Adult Education: Learning for Life*, 2000).

In September 2000, the Minister for Education and Science set up an Action Group on Access to Higher Education. The three main groups identified in the terms of reference of the Action Group were:

- disadvantaged school leavers
- mature students
- students with a disability

The work of the Action Group has recently been published with the report recommending that a single co-ordinating body – the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education – be established within the HEA. The purposes of the office would include drawing up policy proposals and overseeing the implementation of the national programme in liaison with the Department of Education and Science and other stakeholders.

(iii) *Finance*

- there should be a higher education mature student fund to rise to at least £10m a year 'to enable third-level institutions to make innovative strategic shifts towards adult-friendly policies'. Fees will no longer apply to ... part-time students who are means-tested social welfare or unemployment payment recipients or dependants, medical cardholders or dependants, or Family Income Supplement holders or dependants' (*White Paper*, 2000). The Department of Education

and Science and the Higher Education Authority should develop a fund to support part-time undergraduate third-level courses (Commission on the Points System, 1999).

(iv) Institutional action

- ‘the absence of a strong case for widening access (the ‘rhetoric of access’) results in a defensive approach to the issue in some universities’ (Osborne and Leith, 2000, p 31)
- universities should mainstream widening access to demonstrate their commitment to equity. Academic staff could not continue to view widening access as a lowering of standards (Osborne and Leith, 2000).

(v) Entry routes

- third-level institutions would need to develop alternative entry routes from that of the Leaving Certificate. Regional partnerships between universities and with other third-level colleges should be encouraged (Osborne and Leith, 2000)
- there was a need for clarity about whether access courses guarantee access to third-level courses. There should be more coherence and standardisation of access schemes at the national policy level (Osborne and Leith, 2000; Commission on the Points System, 1999)
- there should be mutual recognition of institutions’ access programmes and transferability (*Lifelong Learning* 1998; Osborne and Leith, 2000, p 31). The recently established National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) will fulfil an important function in this regard
- the application and selection process for mature students was not uniform across the sector. Simplification and co-ordination through the Central Applications Office (CAO) were required, by autumn 2002 (Commission on the Points System, 1999).

(vi) Data

- there were inadequate data for tracking and monitoring students once they gained access and this needed to be rectified by the HEA (Osborne and Leith, 2000).

(vii) Study conditions and support

- there was a lack of guidance and counselling for mature students seeking entry to higher education (Commission on the Points System, 1999).

Conclusions

- 3.8 Increasing mature student access is perceived as a key policy objective and this is reflected in statutory provisions (paragraph 3.1).
- 3.9 The Higher Education Authority has addressed the issue through a range of activities (paragraph 3.2).
- 3.10 The policy issues are thus well explored in the official and academic literature (paragraphs 3.4 – 3.7). The literature:
- makes a strong case for extra places to accommodate more mature students and proposes a quota for second chance students
 - contains a clear indication of the need to emphasise part-time and other more flexible forms of delivery
 - argues for a change in the financial basis on which mature students may complete their third-level education

-
- proposes the strengthening of alternative access routes (including accreditation of prior and experiential learning - APEL)
 - suggests the streamlining of applications procedure and criteria
 - advances the need for adult friendly institutional policies and support mechanisms.

Part II: HEA Targeted Initiative on Mature Student Access

CHAPTER 4. THE TARGETED INITIATIVE AND PROVISIONS FOR MATURE STUDENTS

- 4.1 The Higher Education Authority's targeted initiative on mature student access is one of three in the Improving Access category (the other two are disadvantaged students and students with disabilities) intended to provide the opportunity for HEA-funded institutions to work with the HEA in new areas of strategic importance in higher education and to promote equality of opportunity. All the targeted initiatives are a continuation and development of the initiatives inaugurated in 1996. Funding is provided in each case on the basis of proposals made by the head of each university and HEA-funded institution.
- 4.2 The principles underpinning the schemes were consolidated in 2000 and remain in place for 2001:
- (i) Targeted Initiatives are in areas of strategic national or regional importance within higher education, as determined by the Minister for Education and Science and/or the Higher Education Authority. There is deemed to be a national imperative to continue with effective programmes to increase participation of groups in higher education which are currently under-represented, including mature students, as well as disadvantaged students and students with disabilities.
 - (ii) The HEA has stated that the shape of the framework for the targeted initiatives is for the medium term so that there is a clear consistency of its policy. This will mean greater security as regards the availability of funding for institutions and they could therefore seek funding for a number of years.
 - (iii) Following the report by Osborne and Leith (2000), the HEA survey on Provision for Students with Disabilities and this current project on mature students, one of the key issues that has been raised is the need to ensure that there is a commitment to the mainstreaming of access initiatives in higher education institutions. It is widely recognised that mainstreaming funding is not the only requirement for mainstreaming access programmes and that within institutions equity in access opportunities needs to be placed in the main body of policy making and internal academic and resource decisions.
 - (iv) There is a requirement for institutions to use some of their own resources (including funding from the Exchequer) and/or private resources as a substantial counterpart (a guideline of at least 30% is proposed, other than in the case of initiatives which are in the early stages of development) to supplement funding from the HEA under the scheme.
 - (v) Each institution is asked to report annually on actions funded under the programme.
 - (vi) The effectiveness of funding under each initiative, including the Improving Access initiative, are to be independently evaluated on a regular basis by the Higher Education Authority and the findings of the evaluations will be disseminated.

The nature of the initiative

- 4.3 The seven universities and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MIC) and St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin (SPD) were funded to undertake initiatives in the area of mature student access.
- 4.4 The HEA did not seek to prescribe detailed modes of actions to the recipients of its grants under the targeted initiative, a point noted gratefully in some institutions which feel that they have been free to try out a variety of schemes. It indicated, however, the types of proposals that received funding in the past and therefore could be inferred to be those that might be favoured in the future. They included:
- provision of out-reach workers
 - training of adult tutors
 - development of courses and course material
 - orientation for mature students
 - guidance and counselling support
 - courses in preparatory skills (study, note-taking, library, and computer usage etc)

-
- information packs
 - mentoring
 - development of on-line materials
 - promotional materials.

4.5 The HEA also indicated the factors that it would bear in mind in determining allocations. These are helpful indicators in evaluating the utility of the initiative which we return to at the end of this report:

- the extent to which proposals are located within a coherent institutional strategy
- whether projects are new initiatives or will give significant added value to existing programmes
- the capacity to maximise effective use of existing institutional resources and infrastructure
- the sustainability of the projects given that there are not guarantees that the funding will be included in subsequent year's budgets
- the priority afforded by the institution to individual projects seeking targeted funding generally
- the priority given to individual projects seeking targeted funding generally
- the priority given to developing partnerships between colleges and other higher and further education institutions, and with appropriate external bodies, whether public, private or voluntary with a view to supplementing, not supplanting, existing efforts
- provision of evaluation of outcomes and dissemination of results
- contribution towards other HEA objectives e.g., modularisation, innovative teaching methods, gender equality etc.

Costs and scale of the initiative

4.6 The sums provided (Table 4.1) under the mature student initiative below constitute roughly 2% of the £352 million a year HEA spends on higher education. Sums received for the targeted initiative are a matter of public record, but the sums specifically added by institutions to targeted initiative funding are not separately identified and it is plain from interviews that they vary between institutions. In one case 50% of monies spent on the initiative came from institutional funds which for the most part originates from the HEA in the form of the institution's core grant. We give some details of individual use of initiative monies in our institutional profiles (Appendix 1).

Table 4.1 Mature student allocation under targeted initiatives: 1996-2000

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
UCD	50	120	150	250	270
UCC	100	185	200	300	250
NUIG*		84	140	300	325
NUIM		75		100	150
TCD	90	90	100	180	171
UL		12	0	30	130
MIC		10	20	45	89
DCU**			50	80	
SPD		25	20	20	30
TOTAL	240	601	680	1305	1415

* 1998 figure for NUIG includes 40K in respect of a system-wide study regarding promotion of access.

** DCU did not receive an allocation in 2000 as funding was carried over.

4.7 The themes pursued in our visits were:

- institutional arrangements for dealing with mature students and the targeted initiative
- preparation and support for entry to courses
- the student experience of the courses
- educational issues
- social and financial problems of mature students
- costs and resources.

Structures and provisions for mature students

Institutional arrangements: mission statements and actions proposed

4.8 Under Sections 34 and 49 of the Universities Act, 1997 universities are required to prepare a plan setting out the aims of the governing authority for the operation and development of the university and its strategy for achieving those aims. Mission Statements and Strategic Plans are broad statements of aspiration of varying degrees of plausibility and offer no guarantee that what they say will be pursued in the life and work of their basic units. At the same time, they could stimulate the working through of shifts in institutional policies and practice.

4.9 Most institutional statements express some commitment to promoting mature student access. Sometimes these are explicit; in other cases they imply commitment in general statements about widening access and provision for hitherto underrepresented groups. Some of the statements are as follows:

- University College Cork's (UCC) Strategic Development Plan has a section on mature students and life long learning. It refers to UCC as being 'a pioneer in the provision of opportunities for mature students'. It commits itself to meeting a quota of at least 15% of places for mature students
- Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MIC) states in its mission document that it is 'socially inclusive' and in its Yearbook that it is 'a caring institution where there is genuine care and concern for the individual' (*Yearbook, 2000/2002*). Statements of intention on mature student access are made in its Prospectus and Quality Review document
- Dublin City University's (DCU) Academic Plan, soon to be adopted, makes specific reference to life long learning and to helping disadvantaged students but contains no explicit reference to mature students
- University of Limerick's (UL) Strategic Plan states that the University aims 'to ensure that ... students from diverse backgrounds will experience a learning environment which enables them to develop fulfilling careers and contribute effectively to the communities and services with which they become associated'. It specifies general provisions which ought to affect provision

for mature students. Its Planned Actions include reference to improving access for mature students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds

- National University of Ireland, Maynooth's (NIUM) Strategic Plans, 1995-2000 and 2000-2005, specify provision for mature students in which it already has a strong tradition
- in National University of Ireland, Galway's (NUIG) Strategic Plan, which is in line with the Government White Paper on Adult Learning, mature students loom large. Its Strategic Plan of 1995 stated that the university had established 'a most creditable position in facilitating access to mainstream academic course for mature students' (p 40). One of the recommendations in the Plan was that the University 'will sustain its commitment to mature students, will review its criteria for admission and will extend its induction programme for mature students, the majority of whom are at present in Arts' (p 43). The Plans were to be realised by 2000
- Trinity College Dublin's (TCD) application (2000) for HEA funding stated that '... tackling educational disadvantage is now a top priority for the College and the various Access Programmes already funded by the HEA are now central to the College's mission'
- St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin (SPD) makes no specific reference to mature students within the Strategic Plan but it refers to life long learning and changing patterns of recruitment especially in initial teacher education and promotion of widening access
- One of the key change drivers identified by UCD in its Strategic Development Framework, 2000-2004, is changing demographics i.e. 'changing age, gender and socio-economic profile associated with life long learning and increased access to the university' (p5). As part of its strategic development areas, UCD will develop programmes which reflect the changing needs of Irish society. It plans to do so by, amongst other things, significantly increasing access for 'the socially disadvantaged, mature students and other groups with limited access at present' (p 10).

4.10 Almost all of the institutions were already working with mature students before the initiative was launched and accordingly the targeted initiative was, implicitly or explicitly, integrated with other activities. Even, however, in universities explicitly committed to mature student access, with senior academics said to be on board for the targeted initiative, the access policy could be in tension with a determination to uphold a high reputation for research, and the fact that undergraduate places were in demand from well-qualified school leavers. 'The Arts Faculty is bursting with school leavers'. Some interviewees believed that at best their institution was on the brink of a move forward, without as yet adequate structures for advancing the cause of mature students. Some institutions, including both St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin (SPD), Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MIC), University College, Cork (UCC) and the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NIUM) had long reputations for their commitment to entry for a large number of mature students. In most institutions, the targeted initiative did not create the issue, and mostly built on what was already being done, but it heightened attention and provided some resources that were critical to advancing policy and practice.

4.11 In some universities whilst the stated commitment from senior officers and those working on access issues was strong, it might be that 'it is the middle that is of concern, the departmental and faculty heads level'. Some academics were said not to have concern for, or experience of, mature students, and the administrative system was not geared to providing registration, library and other systems for mature and part-time students. In such institutions, however, the targeted initiative was thought likely to help shift the norms. In any event, there was some apprehension, in spite of Dr Fitzgerald's prediction, that the demographic turn-down will make it difficult for universities to fill places with school leavers.

Analysis of institutional activities

4.12 The range of the activities covered by bids against the targeted initiative and those undertaken by institutions funded by a variety of sources, including the initiative, is wide. Table 4.2 includes this full range of activities. An earlier version was sent to institutions for verification and some were good enough to confirm or suggest amendments. The institutional profiles at Appendix 1 refer only to institutional intentions under the targeted initiative.

Table 4.2 Range of activities affecting mature students

	DCU	MIC	NUIG	NUIM	SPD	TCD	UCC	UCD	UL
Planning and organisation				X	X		X		X
Strategic and co-ordinated planning for mature access									
Organisation/dedicated posts for mature student access: Mature Student Officer/ Access Officer/Adult Continuing Education Officer	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Steering Committee		X		X	X	X	X		
Dedicated unit	X	X		X	X	X	X		X
Collaboration with other institutions/sectors	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Recruitment	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Admission targets/quotas									
Targeted recruitment activities	X			X	X	X	X		X
Educational provision		X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Development of preparatory courses									
Development of part-time degree courses	X			X	X		X	X	X
Development of other courses	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
Development of open & distance learning materials	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
Out-reach programmes	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
E-learning	X			X				X	X
Staff development			X	X	X	X			
Travellers/refugees provision			X	X	X		X	X	X
Links with local communities	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Finance				X		X	X		
Studentships or other financial support									
Additional budgetary provision				X	X	X	X		
Recognition of staff for work with part-time students				X					
Support for mature students	X	X		X	X	X	X		X
Induction programme									
Study skill support		X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Careers advice	X	X		X	X		X		X
Crèche	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Evaluation and accreditation	X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Accreditation frameworks etc									
Review/evaluation		X			X	X	X		X
Research			X	X	X	X	X	X	X

4.13 Subsequent sections of this report will discuss some of the more important activities stemming from the initiative in more detail. In Chapter 9 (paragraphs 9.19 - 9.22) we offer suggestions on what further may be done. Here we briefly indicate what seem to be the clearest outcomes, although we emphasise considerable variations between institutions. Although the sums granted through the initiative are relatively modest, they have been used to some effect in that they have:

- in most institutions, generated institutional support to carrying the issue forward through the allocation of responsibility for the initiative to senior roles and/or institutional committees led at a senior level
- allowed the appointment of dedicated staff who act as access or mature student officers. These not only engage in activities of specific importance in enhancing the recruitment and appropriate care for mature students, but also represent a presence on campus in advancing the issue
- such personnel have intensified marketing and recruitment procedures, built up reception and orientation events, offered opportunities in learning skills and techniques, monitored and evaluated student progress and, where necessary, offered mediation with the regular teaching staff
- the initiative has caused some institutions to bring under review selection procedures for mature students
- some institutions have introduced particular courses adapted to the needs of mature students in addition to those already provided e.g., science and or mathematics for mature women returners.

4.14 The initiative was less successful in the following respects:

- in many institutions, it has not led to systematic planning, to include revisions of mission statements, operational plans, budget allocations and staff training to accommodate the needs of mature students. A minority of institutions had already stated, however, independently of the initiative, a target of the proportion of mature students to be admitted
- there is no institution-wide consideration of educational style and delivery appropriate to mature students (although many students do not seek different treatment)
- in most institutions, the benefits experienced by full-time students exceed those derived by part-time students
- some universities have not increased their offer of part-time and distance education as a way to securing the admission of more mature students although some courses have been developed using initiative money
- training is not generally in place to help faculty address the teaching and learning issues raised by the presence of mature students
- no substantial increase in the extent of out-reach work, in addition to that already on offer, can be traced to the initiative.

4.15 Table 4.2 summarises what the institutions are doing for mature students. It shows that the important gaps in relevant action are in strategic planning for mature access, studentships or other financial support, consideration of the educational style and delivery, flexibility of provision, part-time and distance education (paragraph 4.19 - 4.24). **We recommend that higher education institutions give consideration to these issues (BPG 26).**

Institutions' costs and resources

4.16 Once admitted, mature students rightly merge into the general student body. It is not surprising, therefore, that there are usually no specific costings of the extra expenditure engendered by mature students beyond that found by the targeted initiative, although at least two institutions provided additions to initiative

related expenditure. Some of the obvious additional costs incurred are: library services, support services, departmental time. Mature students are more demanding outside class especially about grades if disappointed with marks; interview boards, which students entering on the CAO route rarely have, consume resources although this may be regarded as an investment rather than a cost. Staff development procedures directed towards the teaching and care for mature students should certainly figure among additional costs but do not emerge as a prominent development.

- 4.17 The unit funding system has a number of features that seem to be inhibiting the growth of part-time courses. There is, even in the minds of senior university officials, some uncertainty as to which part-time courses are eligible for funding. The official rubric is that:

‘the courses to be costed are the intra-mural courses recognised by the HEA for the purposes of funding and exclude Adult Education Courses, In-service Training Courses, part-time courses leading to qualifications from professional bodies and other non-recognised extra-mural courses’

‘the net costs of providing these excluded courses, when they arise, are included in the College’s accounts and are regarded as a College overhead to be applied to the recognised courses’.

- 4.18 This definition means that a significant number of courses that serve mature students and that in certain other countries would be treated and funded as part of the mainstream of higher education are not funded in Ireland. Hence, in general the type of part-time courses that would be of particular interest to mature students would not be funded. Such courses have therefore to be run on a cost recovery basis. It is likely that the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) will help overcome this problem through the establishment of a national system for academic credit as this would enable funding to be linked to courses that attract academic credit. It should be noted that for new courses to be recognised for funding they must fall within the scope of the current funding framework.

Sustaining the initiative

- 4.19 In considering how far institutions thought it possible to sustain the initiative, we need to note views about the future of mature student market. Some, irrespective of the initiative, intend to go well above a 15% recruitment rate, and this is already achieved in some subjects in some institutions. Others believe that increases in numbers are necessary, but would be difficult to fully achieve because of recruitment difficulties, or because they are likely to unduly restrict entry of well-qualified school leavers. In general the challenge presented by demographic turn down and the possibility of making more room for mature students are not explicitly worked through in terms of such alternative strategies as providing more part-time and distance learning courses. Some do not foresee ‘a case of there being pent up demand and a need to open the flood gates’. They note that many mature students are not second chance students but highly qualified people who are changing career. Some return because they want a change of subject interest. Some women come back to retrieve the position in which boys always got preference when families could not afford to pay fees for all. Numbers would come from women who have reared their families saying ‘it is my turn now’; there are more of that cohort than any other, a point reinforced by the findings of our student survey. One college has noted a drop in applications but not in women returners.
- 4.20 Some institutional leaders are likely to back continuation of activities under the initiative because they believe mature students bring a great deal to the institution, but not all institutions can be certain about continuation if central funding ceased. At least one university has, however, already mainstreamed its funding.
- 4.21 The specific problems in sustaining the initiative will arise not so much from continuing to advance such practices as marketing courses and working on more appropriate access procedures and curriculum. It is expenditure on access officers, preparatory courses and mature student officers which are the substantive ways in which funds have been used. There is apprehension that temporary staff may not be able to continue without initiative funding. Institutions hope to be able to take at face value the various statements (The White Paper and National Development Programme are quoted) that additional resources will be targeted to these areas. We note, however, that the HEA has recently established the possibility of continuity of initiative funding.

- 4.22 Institutions therefore present a range in their intentions on meeting the national policy. At the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), over five years, the target number of disadvantaged, mainly adult, students set at 200 in 1999 would increase to 300, to be achieved by increasing access and foundation courses. The two colleges are fully committed to recruiting more mature students who 'bring a whole range of life experiences to the programme', one by nearly 50% in the next 10 years. At another university, it was expected that the projected drop in school leavers was likely to be offset to some extent by an increase in the number of mature students seeking to upgrade professional qualifications or acquire new courses as part of the increased emphasis on life long learning. Yet another, the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUJM) will look to the potential in part-time, modular and distance education to offset falling numbers, although they are sensible of competing offerings in some areas from employers and institutes of technology, often working in partnership, and from private colleges. At DCU, since 1980, 20% of places are reserved on all programmes for mature students, and a deferred entry scheme is in place to allow students to defer their entry to assist them, inter alia, to mature before taking up their place. At UCC, the objectives of the University include facilitation of life long learning through adult continuing education. It has widened access to degree and diploma programmes for adults.
- 4.23 This last example evokes a broader policy point, perhaps outside our remit: may not courses devised jointly by employers and institutes rather than attempts to recruit mature students to university courses meet the skills shortages?

Central administration concerning mature students and/or the initiative

- 4.24 Institutional responsibility for the initiative and for policy on mature students is managed in various ways. The majority, but not all, of the institutions have a steering committee for the initiative and for mature student policy under the chair of a senior academic, a dean or somebody of vice-president level. At one university, all of the programmes for the disadvantaged are within the province of a vice-president, and central concerns are pursued by the adult and continuing education, mature students, and project development officers. Elsewhere responsibility may be shared between a dean and registrar. For the most part, but not everywhere, the level of ultimate responsibility is towards the top of the hierarchy, it is connection between the university and the departments and other units that may still need strengthening.
- X
- 4.25 In a number of universities, for example, departments or units concerned with adult and continuing education play a significant role in enhancing the institution's work with mature students, both through their links with the local community which encourages mature students to apply and through the support provided once enrolled. In other places the corresponding units are more peripheral and do not greatly impact on the rest of the institution. In one university, the responsibility rests with individual faculties and the central services and with the institution which prefers to treat the issue holistically.

Do initiatives constitute new projects or do they add value to existing work?

- 4.26 If a great deal of work with mature students, often not identified as such, was already taking place before the initiative was launched, the novelty and added value of the initiative rest in the implication of national support and the ability it confers to make committed appointments and to start preparatory courses. 'It has helped to maintain coherence and energy devoted to mature student recruitment and has allowed new possibilities.'
- 4.27 Specific additions resulting from the initiative include the appointment of mature students or access officers or Learner Support Units, wholly or partly concerned with mature students (see paragraphs 4.57 - 4.62).

Initiatives independent of targeted expenditure

- 4.28 All of the institutions have long received mature students although they were rarely identified as a separate target group. Many courses are not part of central funding calculations, are often not listed separately and therefore not taken credit for. They include, for example
- extra-mural courses aimed at community leaders and potential leaders, trade unionists and human resource managers
 - an evening Arts programme going back some decades

- out-reach work on Saturdays and in the evenings
- an Access Programme funded (as to 50%) as a targeted initiative, but plans for attracting more mature students were adumbrated earlier
- a Learning Support Unit established before initiative funding
- a University offering several part-time and evening courses. It has departments with a majority of mature students
- an evening Arts programme has routes towards both a four-year and an eight-year degree. One or two year courses in subjects of special interest are offered and an out-reach programme uses courses as building blocks towards a degree at the student's own pace
- in a Department of Applied Social Studies, mature students are now in the majority. In a Social Science degree there are 300 students. Forty percent of places are reserved for mature students
- a degree course in Youth and Community Work has a 100% intake of mature students. It is targeted at marginalised groups and those who work with them: lone parents, travellers, disabled people, and is offered at both the university and as an out-reach course
- a Social Work degree is only for mature students and another in Early Childhood Studies has a 50% mature student intake.

4.29 We have noted how some institutions lay claim to a long engagement with mature students. At UCC, for the last 30-40 years, mature students have played an important role and constitute around 10% of the total. Both MIC and SPD had mature students on BA and BEd degrees before the targeted initiatives. From the inception (in 1993), one of their BA Humanities degree has had a large component in it that addresses mature students and life long learning generally. UCD has a long-established commitment to part-time mature students through its BA Modular programme and many other courses. At NUIM, mechanisms for facilitating access for mature students have become well-established.

Links with other education sectors

4.30 Many of the nine institutions have links with other education sectors some, but not all, of which have arisen from targeted initiatives. Some universities work with institutes of technology to provide joint access or other courses for mature students. A course at the University of Limerick (UL), funded by the initiative, is designed to enable women returners to make informed choices between university and institute of technology environments. The National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) takes a lead role in a Regional Higher Education Network, including five institutes of technology; it furthers research on delivery of courses, and will share expertise and resources. Many have extensive links, too, with community groups, youth groups, the voluntary sector, VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme), other providers in the area (NCEA, NCVA providers etc) and Community Education/Resource Groups as provided through the VEC (Vocational Education Committees). Trinity College Dublin (TCD) is currently in discussion with a number of VECs to devise a series of models for out-reach adult learning and has arranged visits through the Education Units of the Prison Service. Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MIC) has close links with its neighbouring university, complements its arts and education courses and has several joint projects with it. UCC has a good relationship with an IT: they have unwritten agreements about not expanding into each other's territories and have co-operated in establishing a campus in a disadvantaged area. NUIM conducts an out-reach programme in Kilkenny in collaboration with the Institute of Technology, Carlow.

Marketing places to mature students

4.31 Most institutions are not finding it easy to recruit full-time mature students, particularly in some subjects. It can be assumed that those institutions that have used targeted initiative funds to appoint dedicated mature student or access staff will have increased their marketing efforts. Although some make extensive publicity and marketing efforts, the students whom we met said that it is often difficult for people in settings remote from higher education to fully grasp the possibilities of securing access. 'No one is out

there telling us what is available - which could be so easily disseminated.' Mature students may never have been inside a college and do not know whom to contact. Word of mouth or the local press or through friends or relatives who had taken courses or through an education guidance counsellor at a community evening class are the ways in which they might learn of the opportunities, or they might have seen an advertisement in the *Irish Times Educational Supplement*.

4.32 Institutions' attempts to market the opportunities open to mature students are variable. The appointment of access or mature students' officers has to some extent lent focus to such efforts. In the opinion of students whom we met, they have often been insufficient. One university believed, surprisingly, that no overt marketing to mature applicants was necessary because there was a national knowledge regarding its mature intake and it would take a significant resource. In one case, a reader of a recruitment booklet would have to reach page 21 to find the first reference to degrees offered on a part-time basis.

4.33 At the same time, some institutions make considerable efforts. At Trinity College Dublin (TCD), apart from Open Days, its general recruitment efforts included six meetings with branches of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors and representation at 32 careers' exhibitions. 'We go out to recruit to put a face on the institution e.g., to a local prison to speak to the educators of offenders there.' It works with external organisations which provide advice to and assist individuals to further their education, e.g., AONTAS and VTOS. It advertises in the community and national press.

4.34 Across institutions, the range of marketing procedures is as follows:

- advertisements in local and national press and publicity through local radio
- talks given to local colleges
- on open days, special sessions for mature applicants to which both individual applicants and community groups might be invited
- ensuring the active presence of current mature students at open days
- looking at where people go, e.g., churches, the many women's organisations and farming organisations, and using parish and community newsletters
- attendance at annual adult education fairs, the Higher Options Conference and AONTAS exhibitions on adult courses (with mature students attending to talk to prospective students)
- visits to access programmes and extra mural programmes
- recruiting active involvement of mature student societies
- making informal contacts through regional employment offices
- improving use of printed material. For example, Adult Education booklets including a contact name and number for institutions
- distributing posters and brochures widely to e.g., VTOS and access course centres
- presentations at Adult Education Centres offering Vocational Training Opportunities Schemes (VTOS)
- designing a Web page for current and prospective mature students
- making approaches to employers (presumably for block or part-time release)
- liaising with the Irish Council for Refugees.

4.35 A more vigorous and targeted nation-wide campaign through the media was thought necessary by many of the students we interviewed and by those who responded to the student survey (see Part III). For example, the television and other advertising encouraging applicants for 2001/02 to get their forms in on time referred only to school leavers. But local, institutional publicity was also needed. It can be surmised, however, that these efforts would be effective if only made as part of a more holistic effort including the setting of institutional and departmental targets and a clear plan of action with a publicity budget attached to it. Communication is more effective if there is a clear, strong message to communicate.

Preparatory courses

4.36 Preparatory courses preparing mature applicants for third-level education are provided under different labels, including foundation and access courses: we use a generic title of preparatory courses. (Part of our student survey targeted mature students on preparatory courses; the responses we received are analysed in Part III of this report.) Such courses are a significant feature of the targeted initiative in some, but not all, of the institutions and emerge in different forms. They are greatly appreciated by students, and have a good success rate as measured by access to and progression through full-time degree courses. They are

likely to set up good models of recruitment, educational and support practice for wider application with larger numbers. Their leadership is sophisticated and caring and they would make a good site for research and development in this field of activity. Those responsible for them often play an active role in supporting mature students once they join the regular undergraduate courses.

4.37 In one example, Trinity College Dublin, of the 67 students registered over the last three years, 29 had left at primary level or secondary school with no certificate. Of the 44 students who registered in 1997 and 1998, 86% completed of whom 84% were offered places at third-level institutions. The course may also have a 'cooling-out' function in that students may discover after all that they do not want to go on to third-level and thus anticipate later drop-out.

4.38 The success of this course is thought to be due to:

- funding from HEA and bursaries from the institution
- small class numbers – makes for involvement and engagement of tutors and students in all aspects of the course (crucial to adult learners)
- dedicated guidance time
- dedicated staff to discuss and help resolve personal issues
- full-time co-ordinator
- evaluations - formative and summative
- flexibility in relation to course content
- student-centred approach caters for different levels and needs as in Mathematics and IT
- course organisers' and tutors' commitment and involvement
- role modelling provided by former students already in the institution
- foundation course on 'site' gives a realistic experience of the real thing, and building sense of 'ownership' and institutional identity
- 'family day' to mark the support of families and friends.

4.39 The organisers of the course believe that courses need to be delivered on an out-reach basis in one of two ways: three-four mornings a week for young mothers who could get their children into community crèches and a course three-four evenings a week for men 'against whom the current system discriminates. It is almost impossible for them to come back to this course because it is just not flexible enough'. The VECs are interested in partnerships and administering the programme and the university would oversee its academic quality.

4.40 At another university, the University of Limerick, the funded mature students' course has had a modest beginning. Students can link with a first year course and secure entry to the university. A gender equity programme is funded under the HEA initiative. It offers a part-time course in science and technology, needed by women returners. Its course team is from both the university and an institute of technology. Press and radio advertisements are used. All applicants are interviewed. The mathematics-learning centre runs a mathematics course for mature and other students. Training in adult education is given to tutors; particular concerns are personal support issues. Learning and personal development support are to be provided in part through a mentoring system. Student support each other at weekend and away days. To help school travel, the course starts at 10 00 am with half an hour for lunch so they can leave at 3.30 pm. Eighteen out of 19 completed the course. Eight proceeded to degree courses. Two were studying at private colleges. Six were in employment or in own business.

4.41 University College Dublin offers a Return to Learning Course at its main campus and at up to four out-reach centres. In recent years the courses have recruited over 60 students, of whom about a third are, by virtue of their low incomes, not charged fees. This part-time course predates the targeted initiative but its development has been assisted by targeted initiative funding. The original course is humanities based but a course with a commerce theme has recently been introduced. Just over 70% of students successfully complete the course and, of these, about 70% have gone on to join a third-level course in the subsequent year, although the promotional brochure makes it clear that the course confers no guarantee of admission to degree courses. A majority of the students take courses at other universities, most of which are either in, or reasonably close to, Dublin, as might be expected given the geographical constraints faced by mature students. In the past a majority of the students joined part-time courses but this changed with the abolition of fees for full-time courses, although a sizeable minority still enrol on third-level part-time courses.

4.42 There is some division of opinion about where preparatory work should be located. Some faculty believe that it could be best undertaken in institutions below those of the third-level and that universities should work with further education institutions to that end. We heard that, at some institutions, applicants who have the necessary aptitude, and who are rejected only because of a shortage of places, are being unnecessarily encouraged to take an access course. Also, they can deal with only relatively small numbers, and are expensive per student. However, we consider that there should be encouragement of those preparatory courses where students are guaranteed entry to a third-level course on successful completion of them. There needs to be greater consistency in their terminology and the establishment of a national system of accreditation.

Accreditation and transfer

4.43 As the Commission on the Points System (1999) observed, the position of accreditation and transfer is confusing for potential mature students for a number of reasons. Different courses have different forms of accreditation. Academic units have different approaches to selection. The term access is also used for second-level courses. Whilst some use the title 'access' courses to describe courses which give an automatic right of entry to those who succeed in them, others use the term for courses with no such guarantee. It is to be hoped that the NQAI will help to clarify these positions (see paragraph 4.52).

4.44 It was felt not fair to put people in courses that were not fully accredited; students completing preparatory courses should be able to transfer to institutions offering the course sought after. This would create transferability across the whole of the third-level. There was also support for central benchmarking of accredited prior and experiential learning.

4.45 At one university, few preparatory course students were admitted to a full-time course and many were advised to apply elsewhere after successfully completing it. Successful students, as other mature students, must sit entrance tests which many find formidable. At a further university a credit framework and a credit-based system for the first degree and certificate and diploma courses provide entry routes. Other variations are that some are full-time courses lasting up to one year; elsewhere there are part-time, and/or evening courses. This variation, however, is not disadvantageous because it offers a range of possibilities to would-be students.

Getting in

4.46 Institutions have legal responsibility for admissions and the conditions on which they admit students. But they work within a complex of provisions made by bodies external to themselves, and which offer routes to higher education other than through the school leaving certificate:

- Vocational Education Committees (VECs) provide technical and vocational education for local communities. They include second level, adult and continuing education, community and second chance education (VTOS), PLC courses, prison education and traveller education. VECs are financed by state grants and by local authorities
- the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) courses have been designed to meet the education and training needs of unemployed people. They are certified at a range of levels and include the Leaving Certificate and NCVA Levels I and II
- NDEC (Oscail) provides distance learning courses in collaboration with a number of universities and ITs. It works with university staff and aims to get its courses accredited by all universities. It has 3,500 students. No entry qualifications are required; the average age of students is 44. NDEC teaches students and universities award the degree
- Higher Education Training and Awards Council (HETAC) (formerly the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA)) is the awarding body for the Certificates for students 21 or over and is responsible for ACCS (Accumulation of Credit and Certification of Subjects). Modules earned can lead to a National Certificate or National Diploma equivalent to two years and three years of HE study. A degree can be awarded after a further year of study

- Further Education Training and Awards Council (FETAC) (formerly the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA)) is responsible for Post-Leaving Certificates (PLC) courses provided by colleges. PLC course objectives include enabling progression to higher education or training, approximately 30% of PLC students are over 21. They are further education courses certified by the National Council for Vocational Awards at Levels II or III and can provide a route to the institutes of technology
- the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland's (NQAI) remit does not include the universities, although there is a statement which anticipates 'voluntary co-operation', but its overall mission is to facilitate life long learning and promote access, transfer and progression for all learners.

- 4.47 If mature students have several ways in which they can qualify for admission to third-level education it is difficult for them to get to grips with which prior qualification will enable them to enter what course. There is also the large issue of how far work or more general life experience can count towards qualification for entry. The work of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland will help to disentangle these issues (see paragraph 4.52).
- 4.48 The main route for entry to university is through the CAO; it also allows for special entry to full-time higher education by mature students. There are, however, felt to be problems with the CAO application form on which some mature students apply. It is not specific about the information required; applicants who know their way around the system do best at providing the relevant information. A special form for mature student applications is thought to be needed.
- 4.49 Institutions and departments have different admission policies and in most institutions for most courses only a minority of mature applicants succeed in gaining entry. Some have clarified the numbers of mature students they intend to accept and others have not. Specific procedures are usually set by Programme Boards rather than the institutions, and to some extent this is justified by the different requirements that emanate from the nature of different subject areas; one university could not get Faculty Heads to agree an entire system because each course has different entry requirements. For particular courses, there may be small numbers and specific targets for the departments to set according to policy recommendations.
- 4.50 All institutions allow mature students to enter without the standard Leaving Certificate requirements if they satisfy specially created entry requirements. They vary: some preparatory course students may be guaranteed an interview whereas other mature students might not be granted this opportunity. Other mature students are required to sit aptitude and other tests and may get an interview on the basis of that. Opinions divide on the use of interviews as being subjective and it is difficult to document reasons for one person over another. Others favour an interview where they can test motivation, evidence of prior learning and what books applicants have read. Work experience may be considered. Examination results and references may also be requested from those who have taken a foundation, return to learning or VTOS course. Requirements might include a psychometric test or other tests to separate applicants at different levels of ability and a written essay, in some cases to be written before the interview. Advice may be offered to those who are rejected. Some applicants are advised to attend a return to learning course and reapply the following year.
- 4.51 Some thought is going into improving methods of selection. A Learning Support Unit in one college intends to explore how the system could deal with accrediting prior learning. Another college proposes to develop 'a national, transparent, effective and just selection method for mature entry to all higher education institutions to replace the use of psychometric tests which are not 'mature friendly' but are more geared to the Leaving Certificate student skills. It is thus critically evaluating its methods and investigating the potential of alternative psychometric tests to the one currently in use and developing predictive models (based on empirical data) for use in the selection process at national level.
- 4.52 Ireland has not yet established a credit transfer system, although there are plans to do so under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. The new NQAI has the task of setting up the national equivalency tables and ladders of progression. Institutions will generally welcome it, but many, too would welcome a committed initiative from the centre to unify accreditation of prior learning and transferability. There is also some demand for some kind of national benchmarking system of preparatory courses and other forms of prior learning and experience to avoid use of the Leaving Certificate which may not suit everyone to sit as an adult.

Orientation courses and procedures

- 4.53 The evidence from our interviews is that orientation and support given to mature students on entry to undergraduate life are critical to their ability to assimilate well to university work and to reconcile it with their other obligations. Some institutions have used targeted initiative funds to set up or to enhance these activities. One access officer noted: 'The College holds an Induction Day and a reception in the evening for mature students and their families at the beginning of the year ... such a reception helped with the renegotiation of roles that had to take place. They can have a whinge with other partners, so they are not alone. Breakdown in relations can be a serious result of adult education as college is big commitment'.

Child-minding facilities

- 4.54 Almost everywhere, child-care facilities are a problem. This was made clear to us by many of the faculty and administration we met, and the mature students we interviewed. It was also a message that was loudly voiced by many of the respondents to our student survey (see Part III). Although these facilities are outside the ambit of the initiative, they have a direct bearing on institutions' capacity to recruit and support mature students. Some institutions have virtually no or insufficient facilities. Facilities are not flexible enough to help parents meet unexpected crises. Inflexible timetables are not easily reconciled with family obligations, although some part-time and evening courses have timetables enabling children to be left off and picked up from school. Shortage of teaching accommodation may restrict institutions' room for flexibility, even when faculty are willing to meet mature students' timetabling needs. Where a university has a good crèche it is helpful for students living nearby with children under five, but many students have to travel. There is no funding provided for those who cannot use the university facilities. One university has a child-care fund (funded by the European Social Fund) which is able to offer £300 per student.

- 4.55 Individual students tell of difficulties such as:

(a single mother) 'I have no mobile phone and I am not contactable and my mother lives 15 miles away. I would like to be able to leave my timetable with someone in administration so I can be reached in case my son needs me.'

'I have a child who is two and work a 14 hour day on Sundays so I can afford crèche fees so I can go to college. There are tremendous pressures because college hours are 9-6 and crèche hours are 9-5 15 so I have to pay someone two days a week to come and collect my son. I am trying to fit education in my life while for 18 year olds it is their life. No extensions are given and I have to attend tutorial times at 5-6 pm.'

'There is a crèche, but it's not available for short-term use.'

In one university, the tradition has been that children were never seen in the library although if people come along with children to get books, they are allowed in.

- 4.56 The lack of child-minding facilities explains why there are few students with children under 12 on preparatory courses (Cregan, 1998). Students are also concerned that child-minders are not being paid the market rate and that the turnover rate of staff is high. There is little in place institutionally for after-school care, mid-term breaks and school holidays which would take a lot of pressure off mature students. In past years, one university has hired someone to mind children in a room set aside so mature students can attend the programme.

Support

- 4.57 The degree of support afforded to mature students varies by institution and departments within them. One faculty member described it as: 'A wonderful experience on one end and utter abandonment on the other'. In some universities it was felt that they should not be accorded special treatment which would tend to ghettoise them – a view shared by many students. In others there was a level of discontent expressed at some of our meetings with mature students. This did not speak to inadequate caring for them as much as to a general inadequacy applying to all students, a point to which we will return when we discuss

educational approaches (paragraphs 5.12 - 5.25). At the same time, some of the more fruitful examples of uses of targeted initiative funds can be found in the forms of support that are now offered.

- 4.58 The support systems include those provided centrally through various units and designated roles, such as those of mature student officers, and those that emerge from the normal pastoral and tutorial exercise of functions by faculties and departments. The first category includes admission officers, adult and continuing education officers and mature students officers, access officers, counsellors, chaplains, special support units, health service, college tutors, mature student society and disability officers
- 4.59 It is estimated in one institution that one quarter of the mature students will require some level of additional tuition. Staff may refer students to support units if they identify weaknesses. They have been established under the targeted initiative to 'improve the quality of learning for adult learners at the third-level'. Sometimes there is not a unit but a mature students officer or similar role providing many of the same services. They provide academic and pastoral support, sometimes for the whole student body, but in some cases dedicated to mature students. Support units or officers may help students help themselves to set up independent study groups. Their ambit may go beyond the delivery of services and towards development of, and reflection on, modes of education and social development of mature and disadvantaged students. Some are looking at the whole idea of best practice in access and trying to devise a model that will be flexible, modular and taught in communities. They are a clear benefit deriving from the initiative in introducing into institutions' norms and practices compatible with academic values and criteria, yet carrying forward educational and developmental thinking.
- 4.60 They provide support through pre-recruitment advice, orientation events, teaching and learning support, mediation and, in some cases, evaluation and research. As important, their active approach lends a new dimension of thinking to institutions. Most institutions have created preparatory courses. Some provide educational support through learning clinics. Such posts may form part of a dedicated unit which may continue with responsibility for mature students after entry whilst others lose that responsibility once a student is enrolled. An example of the work of such a unit, now funded under the initiative, is given in Figure 4.1 below:

Figure 4.1. The work of a learning- teaching support unit

- is available to provide one to one consultations and advice on academic issues and strategies
- operates a referral service to the faculty
- provides an academic writing course
- provides pre-session introductory seminars
- provides learner training seminars
- has produced a Study Skills Handbook and a study skills and essay writing web page
- provides Mature Students with a Head Start Programme
- developed stronger links with community and adult education groups
- explored design of a pre-university module
- produced a brochure
- provides a learning support counsellor and one-to-one tutoring on learning e.g., individual pre-exam revision planning and advice on essay writing problems;
- provides a foundation studies module (unit runs a three week course on Academic Writing as part of First Year BA)
- receives students for further support referred by academic staff
- is reviewing best practice on access and trying to devise a flexible model and exploring how could the system deal with accrediting prior learning.

4.61 Other services noted as provided by such units and by other parts of institutions include:

- making the application process easier
- assisting prospective students to evaluate the demands of third-level education, to prepare for entry to college life, and to make informed course choices
- producing a web page containing essential information
- research: student tracking
- co-ordinating the collection of data on the recruitment and performance of mature students
- providing an Induction Day. 'I did not even know what a textbook was and found the sessions on quick reading skills and using an index were extremely helpful'
- providing facilities for a Mature Students Society.

4.62 The support given to mature students in learner support units or preparatory course centres or by mature students officers is often admirable in concept and working but they may be too under-resourced for the tasks facing them. In one institution that prided itself on good relations with students and which offered learner support to all students and with slender resources, mature students felt that there is a lack of support and a lack of communication between the Learner Support Unit and academic departments. '... We have to chase lecturers with a high workload and we are not sure we are even being directed to the right person'.

4.63 Counselling and support systems accordingly have a mediating role. 'Students will often come to us and ask us how to approach an issue with a lecturer ... because without us the situation could have festered and got worse' ... 'Some students ask us whom to approach in English about problems with a novel. In more extreme cases we have had to do role plays to get them used to the idea and it is more to do with a confidence issue'.

4.64 A recurrent point was that staffing practices did not appear to reflect the needs of out-reach programmes such as the time needed for extra support required by students, and the additional travelling time for staff. Nor was remuneration for extra work adequate, particularly since out-reach work affected faculty's ability to undertake the research necessary for promotion. Nor were the inducements needed to encourage full-time staff to teach in the evenings and weekends sufficient.

4.65 Although faculty may feel that mature students relate well together and support each other, many are restricted by lack of finance, convenient residential accommodation, and heavy timetables. The social support issues and issues of academic confidence and psychology combine to make it difficult for them. It is not surprising that mature students make a lot of use of the pastoral facilities. Indeed many of the mature students who responded to our student survey held the view that third-level institutions should give special attention to the needs of mature students, especially in terms of help with study skills and the like (see Part III).

Conclusions and recommendations

Nature of the initiative

- 4.66 The HEA does not seek to prescribe detailed modes of actions to grant recipients. Institutions are free to try out a variety of schemes (paragraph 4.4).
- 4.67 The sums specifically added by institutions to targeted initiative funding are not separately identified; they vary between institutions (paragraph 4.6).
- 4.68 Most institutional statements express some commitment to promoting mature student access, sometimes in general statements about widening access and provision for hitherto underrepresented groups (paragraph 4.9).
- 4.69 Almost all institutions were already working with mature students before the initiative was launched and accordingly it is, implicitly or explicitly, integrated with other activities (paragraph 4.10).
- 4.70 The sums granted through the initiative are relatively modest. They have been used to some effect in that they have:
- allowed the appointment of dedicated staff who act as access or mature student officers
 - caused some institutions to bring under review selection procedures for mature students
 - allowed some institutions to introduce particular courses adapted to the needs of mature students (paragraph 4.13).
- 4.71 The initiative is less successful in the following respects:
- in many institutions, it has not led to systematic planning, to include revisions of mission statements, operational plans, budget allocations and staff training to accommodate the needs of mature students
 - there is no institution-wide consideration of educational style and delivery appropriate to mature students (although many students do not seek different treatment)
 - in most institutions, the benefits experienced by full-time students exceed those derived by part-time students
 - some universities have not increased their offer of part-time and distance education as a way to securing the admission of more mature students
 - training is not generally in place to help academic staff address the teaching and learning issues raised by the presence of mature students
 - it is unclear whether there has been a substantial increase in the extent of out-reach work, in addition to that already on offer, that can be traced to the initiative (paragraph 4.14).

Planning and resources

- 4.72 The following points are relevant to institutional planning and the use of resources:
- the most important gaps in relevant action are in strategic planning for mature access, studentships or other financial support, consideration of the educational style and delivery, flexibility of provision, part-time and distance education (paragraph 4.15). **We recommend that higher education institutions give consideration to these issues (BPG 26)**
 - a minority of institutions provide resources for the initiative from their own funds. Mature students usually engender unspecified costs (paragraph 4.16)

- the unit funding system has a number of features that seem to be inhibiting the growth of part-time courses (paragraph 4.17)
- some institutions are likely to back continuation of activities under the initiative but not all institutions could be certain about continuation if central funding ceased (paragraphs 4.20 – 4.21). We note, however, that the HEA has recently established the possibility of continuity of initiative funding
- courses devised jointly by employers and institutes rather than attempts to recruit mature students to university courses may better meet the skills shortages (paragraph 4.23)
- institutional responsibility for the initiative and for policy on mature students is managed in various ways. The level of ultimate responsibility is towards the top of the hierarchy; it is connection between the university and the departments and other units that may still need strengthening (paragraph 4.24). **We recommend that higher education institutions give consideration to ways in which units and staff can be encouraged to take on board issues relating to mature students (BPG 28)**
- the novelty and added value of the initiative rest in the implication of national support and in the ability it confers among other things to make committed appointments of access officers, and mature student officers and to start preparatory courses (paragraphs 4.26 & 4.27)
- all of the institutions have long received mature students although they were rarely identified as a separate target group. There are many examples of courses suitable for mature students already being provided (paragraphs 4.28 & 4.29).

Connections and marketing

- many of the nine institutions have links with other education sectors; some, but not all, have arisen from targeted initiatives (paragraph 4.30)
- it is often difficult for people in settings remote from higher education to fully grasp the possibilities of securing access (paragraph 4.31)
- institutions' attempts to market the opportunities open to mature students are variable and often insufficient. However, some institutions made considerable efforts and employ a range of marketing procedures (paragraphs 4.32 – 4.34)
- a more vigorous nation-wide campaign through the media is thought necessary by many students. Television and other advertising encouraging applicants should refer to applicants other than school leavers. Local, institutional publicity is also needed. These efforts will be effective if only made as part of a more holistic effort including the setting of institutional and departmental targets and a clear plan of action with a publicity budget attached to it (paragraph 4.35). **We recommend that national agencies and higher education institutions give consideration to more effective publicity at national level (BPG 13)**

Preparatory courses and accreditation and transfer

- preparatory courses are a significant and appreciated feature of the targeted initiative in some, but not all, of the institutions (paragraph 4.36)
- some academic staff believe, however, that access work can be best undertaken in institutions below those of the third-level and that universities should work with further education institutions to that end (paragraph 4.42)
- different preparatory courses have different forms of accreditation and academic units have different approaches to selection (paragraph 4.43). Students completing such courses should be able to transfer to institutions offering the course sought after (paragraph 4.44). However, Ireland has not yet established a credit transfer system (paragraph 4.52), although there are plans

to do so under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. **We recommend that a national course credit scheme be created and transfer between institutions established and that accreditation and access procedures be standardised (BPGs 11 & 12)**

- there are felt to be problems with the CAO application form on which some mature students apply. A special form for mature student applications is thought to be needed (paragraph 4.48). **We recommend that consideration should be given to this issue by CAO and higher education institutions (BPG 14)**

Support

- orientation and support given to mature students on entry to undergraduate life are critical to their ability to assimilate well to university work and to reconcile it with their other obligations (paragraph 4.53) **We recommend that higher education institutions give full support to units and staff concerned with educational, counselling and social support to students (BPG 30)**
- almost everywhere, child-care facilities are a problem (paragraphs 4.54 – 4.56). **We recommend that higher education institutions give consideration to better child-care facilities for mature students with children (BPG 31)**
- counselling and support systems do have a mediating role (paragraph 4.63)
- staffing practices do not reflect the needs of out-reach programmes such as the time needed for extra support required by students, and the additional travelling time for staff. Nor is remuneration for extra work adequate (paragraph 4.64). **We recommend that higher education institutions give consideration to providing academic staff with adequate recognition for time dedicated to courses in outlying areas (BPG 34)**

CHAPTER 5. STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF COURSES

- 5.1 Our study was necessarily concerned with the overall logic, structure and outcome of the targeted initiative but, although we could not get more than marginally into the issue, the nature of the educational experience emerged as salient. The issues are: the style of education on offer; allaying anxiety; the extent to which content is changing; the shift towards more continuous assessment; course provision; shifts in organisation: modular, and distance education courses.

The style of education on offer

- 5.2 Those involved in life long learning tend to assume that the curriculum or modes of instruction should be modified to allow for the particular needs and knowledge of mature students. This is an assumption only partly supported internationally by faculty in many subject areas who vary in their belief in the importance of taking students' working and life experience as the basis for third-level education (Kokosolakis and Kogan, 2001).
- 5.3 For the most part, mature students and faculty would not expect the main body of knowledge, concepts and techniques that constitute the 'higher education experience' to be altered for the sake of mature students: that would be condescending and not acceptable to universities which aim to provide teaching consistently based on scholarship. At the same time, universities are opening up to new forms and criteria of knowledge which more willingly admit experiential learning than do more traditional formulations. The University of Limerick (UL) which offers co-operative education, under which students spend nine months in supervised work placement, states in its Strategic Plan that 'the student population will be much more diverse ... and this will require greater flexibility in scheduling, assessment, pedagogy and a re-examination of existing procedures to ensure that an optimal learning environment is provided'. The Dean of Learning and Teaching is carrying through these policies and in our view all institutions will do well to review their educational styles and provisions in this way. Inasmuch as these changes occur they will affect all students. Contributions by the initiative towards other HEA objectives e.g., modularisation, innovative teaching methods, gender equality, are likely to come about indirectly, through the work of learning support and mediation by access and mature student officers, or through developments keyed in by teaching and learning units where they exist.

Allaying anxiety

- 5.4 It was noted that mature students showed no defects in memory skills, but rather anxiety that they cannot do as well as the young. Anxiety may serve as a driver at early stages, but if it persists it becomes dysfunctional. Part of the approach is to allay those concerns. They may need support in course, but did not want to be separated from the others.
- 5.5 Once mature students enter a department they are generally treated the same as other students. They may be assigned to a personal tutor. They may tend to sit together in class, but split up for certain modules. Mostly they are left to it, and no one may have special responsibility for mature students, although individual teachers might take an interest. Many of the problems need not arise where there is a strong departmental personal tutor system, although staffing ratios make academic staff hard pressed. Indeed, many respondents to our student survey expressed the desire for more access to tutors. They also expressed the desire for improved teacher skills in the classroom combined with better knowledge and understanding of the needs and responsibilities of mature students (see Part III).
- 5.6 At the beginning of the course, students may need reassurance about their capacity to succeed. 'The first semester may come as bit of a shock.' The problems met within faculties and departments were mainly psychological – 'can I do it?' and some fear of the obligation to produce written assignments and exams. Some senior members of faculty spend quite a deal of time in helping mature students to overcome their apprehensions about a return to a world in which essay writing to dead-lines and mastery of complex texts were the norm. Some spoke of the special relationship that might be developed with them: they were not afraid to ask questions, and some became personal friends. In some faculties, but not all, there is an open door arrangement for advice from staff. 'There is a first year meeting to make them aware that faculty are alive to their anxieties and second and third year wine and talk evenings held in an impressive historic part of the college'. This picture contrasts with that of another university where an active and committed access officer does a great deal for mature students but according to more than one member of faculty,

'the whole pastoral area is neglected'. There is difficulty in getting access to the four counsellors who are understaffed. Such facilities as exist are not always known about by students.

- 5.7 The need for mediation mentioned above suggests, however, that some teachers have a narrow perception of their tutorial and pastoral functions. In some institutions students are allocated a personal tutor. But their presence was not always made obvious to us in our discussions with ten groups of students. The particular issue of mature students raises the general and fundamental issue of the responsibility that does and should rest on departments to look after their students. We have instances where students paid strong tribute to the help given by staff. But we were also surprised to find how many students whom we met seemed grateful for quite small attentions given them, and spoke of the difficulty of securing individual attention. The tutorial function should figure strongly in any staff development schemes. We are, however, aware that staffing ratios are not generous, given the burdens on staff from, for example, quality assurance and the need to demonstrate research outcomes. Perhaps the reduction in the numbers of students will ameliorate this.
- 5.8 Even where tutorial, adult education and mature student officer concern for students is strong, some areas of central administration are thought to lack attention to the needs of mature students. The experience of seeking careers advice, too, from within one university was not good: one student was told she was too old to be thinking of a career. The system was said to be standardised so that mature students were constantly having to explain why the system had to be modified for them. The problems may be accentuated for part-time students. In the view of one administrator, however, it is possible to go overboard – 'university is not about spoon feeding. Many mature students are aggressive, with unrealistic expectations'. At the same time we encountered administrators strongly committed to mature student access and meeting their needs.

Assessment

- 5.9 There is a tendency towards a higher proportion of continuous assessment as part of a general trend; professional training in particular has met requirements of mature students through such an emphasis. 'Teachers question the validity of closed book three hour examinations for people in their fifties.' 'Evaluation is continuous here with a cumulative system so it is pressurised all the time rather than concentrating at the end which adds pressure and is a source of stress. We have seen excellent mature students break down in formal exam situations while younger students are drilled in it.' Continuous assessment together with modular systems are, however, noted as imposing a continuing burden on students and teachers which is not always appreciated in advance.

Course provision

- 5.10 If courses do not differentiate between mature students and school leavers, there is already a large variety that are particularly suited to mature students. They may not derive directly from the targeted initiative but are part of the general move forward in meeting the needs of non-traditionally recruited students. Some examples from different institutions are:
- out-reach part-time degrees in external centres in e.g., archaeology and history, psychology and sociology. The university is working on a modular, flexible curriculum and has two outlying Irish language centres
 - 'anybody working in companies etc can apply to be a link-in student in any of the modules'
 - a science access course is being developed to meet a decline in applications from mature and young students for science
 - consideration of part-time modular courses, possibly involving more distance learning features
 - a University Industry Programme for continuing professional education to foster links with industry. Provides a semi-distance education course with satellite broadcasts to ten centres across Ireland. Students are aged between 25 and 70 and the vast majority are in employment
 - two-year degree courses for students with diplomas aimed at people with work experience

- a part-time modular evening degree replicates a day degree
 - a Department of Mathematics providing walk-in clinics for remedial maths with a contact person for mature students
 - a library has surveyed mature students on e.g., loans, opening hours, and full-time/part-time priorities. Information skills courses help students to navigate, retrieve and evaluate information
 - diploma courses in an Out-reach Centre in community work, technology and education
 - post-experience programmes for mature learners in industry
 - adult learners who successfully complete diplomas can go on to mainstream degree programmes.
- 5.11 These examples, and many more could be found, demonstrate that flexible part-time and evening courses can attract many mature students.
- 5.12 Concern about the curriculum and its delivery is evident in some institutions but mainly about styles in general than the explicit concerns of mature students. At Trinity College, Dublin (TCD), there is concern about the need for more staffing resources, particularly part-time staff, and accommodation that will make smaller groups possible and training for graduate students and other part-time teachers.
- 5.13 A particular point made in one university was that students had certificates that they could not use, a complaint often made by those associated with women's groups. Partly in response to that, a university set up a part-time modular degree.
- 5.14 Curriculum and modes of learning are changing but not specifically for mature students. There is a modest trend to modularisation and proliferation of assessment. Whilst many faculty might remain traditional in outlook, younger staff are shifting on modes of delivery and curriculum. Some faculty believe that mature students benefit from more discussion-based programmes, seminars rather than lectures but ratios do not make this possible. 'Many blossom in seminars. Mature students can be articulate in tutorials but not translate that into written work e.g., they can write grammatical English but cannot tackle literary criticism and developing a written argument.' 'Mature students will need support so not to be overcome by the system. Academics are limited by time and ... I cannot have floods of practice run essays. It is difficult to provide smaller groups and working on material within them with staffing ratios of 20:1.'

Staff training and development

- 5.15 Staff development is not well installed in most universities in most countries, but there are aspects of work that might benefit from systematic training. One college intends to provide courses for those teaching mature students and, with the help of the initiative, to support good academic practice by organising short courses on 'the adult learner'. At the University of Limerick (UL) the Dean of Teaching and Learning is active in promoting better practice through nine training interventions to make staff think about the teaching role and the challenges that face them, the ways of dealing with students, and ways of teaching non-conventional groups. At Dublin City University (DCU), the Dean of Teaching and Learning has control of a university-wide budget (about 1% of total income) to improve teaching and learning. These should all affect the treatment of mature students whose educational problems are in substantial degree those of all undergraduate students.

Student perceptions

- 5.16 Most mature students whom we met are glad to be experiencing third-level education and some expressed considerable satisfaction with their courses and general treatment. This was confirmed by the many additional comments provided by respondents in their completed questionnaires for the student survey (see Part III). Institutions vary but some present a formidable list of academic problems. Some may emanate from ungenerous staffing ratios but others from a parsimonious perception of the teaching and tutorial role. We noted earlier examples of the surprising need for mediation between students and staff.
- 5.17 The complaints, as heard from some of the groups of students whom we met, include:

- poor teaching and tutorial practice
- lack of connection between tutorials and texts used in lectures
- tutorials which do not compensate for lack of time for questions about the lectures
- feedback on style of essays given after essays have been marked by lecturer which is too late
- 'a lot of lecturers in exams just want you to give back what they told you. If you had opinions that contradict you have to keep them to yourself'
- 'there is an over emphasis on academic subjects, but, even more, formal lecturing e.g., a lecturer reading from a text book'
- 'some of the lecturers have difficulty relating to mature students because they didn't like being challenged'
- 'there is a hard style of teaching'
- 'mature students are reluctant to ask questions because it might indicate that they should not be here in the first place'
- some lecturers leave little room for engagement in discussion/debate
- students' attendance is marked on a register in some courses
- in some areas (e.g., education) the workload is huge, as much as 26 contact hours a week. 'I am here from 8 am until 6 pm and still cannot keep up'
- the system is too intensive and competitive: 'exams results are posted up so everyone can see how everyone else has done. I would like less emphasis on grades'
- there are heavy examination requirements for first year courses but continuous examinations are also a source of stress
- classes are timetabled early and late and not accessible to students who must get away to deal with family matters.

5.18 Staffing ratios make it difficult to offer repeat sessions and accommodation may not be available for timetable flexibility. These issues do not appear to be taken into account in timetabling lectures and classes. Generally there is little connection between educational and pastoral issues. Once again, many of these issues discussed above, including flexibility of the course timetable and provision, are mirrored in the comments supplied by the respondents to the student survey.

Problems with pre-requisites

- 5.19 Some subject areas demand pre-requisite knowledge which most mature students are unlikely to have. It is virtually impossible take some courses without previous study of mathematics and science or modern languages and, indeed, it is necessary if students are to meet the demands of advanced study in certain areas. We have noted the work of some preparatory courses in helping mature students gain such knowledge.
- 5.20 Students aiming to qualify as primary school teachers are required to be qualified in the Irish language. This is a requirement that most students who raised the issue with us accept as appropriate, although we were told that the level of Irish required for entry which is established nationally is a barrier to admission and prevents graduates from other courses becoming teachers.
- 5.21 The Irish requirement was singled out in some of our interviews as a particular cause for concern and in particular courses in academic Irish language, that were thought to require an academicism not relevant to the preparation of primary school teachers.

Arrangements for delivery of courses

- 5.22 Flexibility in the delivery of courses - through part-time, modular and distance education - will be necessary if Ireland is to recruit many more mature students, and responses to our student survey were supportive of such flexibility in delivery. We have already noted some examples of part-time and distance education provided for mature students. One university with few full-time mature students has a long tradition of evening degree courses, so that its library is open in the evening, Saturdays and most Sundays. The part-time evening degree is seen as the most appropriate provider for adult education. Staff teach on evening programmes out of goodwill. In another, courses are delivered via satellite to another city and overseas (Montana, USA). A town within the university ambit had been selected by Eircom to be a pilot 'information age' town. A particular, but probably atypical, example was of a distance learning

certificate/diploma course for care workers. Student support was provided through local study centres located throughout the Republic. The majority of students were mature females working in the care sector; the qualifications gained from the programme enhanced their chances of promotion.

Distance learning

5.23 Distance learning, including the use of IT, was not often introduced to us as a feature of provision. The major providers of distance education in Ireland are Oscail (National Distance Education Centre, NDEC) and the UK Open University. A number of institutions are exploring the possibilities of using new communication technologies to increase opportunities for students who find travel to the campus difficult. In one university, employers had made it clear that evening out-reach rather than campus based courses were preferred and that they also favoured, but to a lesser extent, distance learning courses which could be in line with providing the collegial experience if blocks of learning were taken on campus. Many mature students had to travel long distances daily from rural areas. A view is beginning to form that course designers do not have to make a sharp choice between distance and face-to-face education. Courses that combine the use of open learning materials that can be studied at home or in the work place with some face-to-face teaching could provide an effective form of education, while reducing considerably the inconvenience experienced by many mature students who have to travel long distances or arrange for child-care.

Part-time courses

5.24 A key issue, not fully taken on board in many institutions, is the need to expand places and provide adequately for part-time students:

‘This university will not experience an upsurge in numbers of mature students whilst only providing full-time courses. The right combination is study groups within work, weekend workshops and part-time release from work to come to a centre. This institution had set up a pilot scheme last year to test how would they be recruited, how admitted, what resources, how would the system work. But no system.’

5.25 Whilst many institutions are considering providing part-time courses, in one university, where between 13% to 16% of students were mature and it was felt necessary to think about more flexible forms of delivery that might include teaching in the evenings or on Saturdays, ‘staff, who still see life in terms of the traditional modes, would need some inducements to participate’. In noting some unwillingness to move forward, it should be again remarked that staffing burdens are heavy, with ungenerous staffing ratios and increased demands for more research outcomes. At the same time, it is clear that if the universities are to attract more mature students, they will have to plan and provide for many more part-timers than is evident in most institutional plans. The numbers of them are unclear, and there are no inducements to institutions or to students to advance the numbers. Reference to part-time students in our interviews was rare, although they were in the majority in our student survey (see Part III).

5.26 There was criticism of the absence of financial support for part-time education:

- ‘Grant aid for second chance students for part-time study would have a transforming effect on the numbers attracted to such courses and our ability to make the provision available.’
- It was seen as unfair that: ‘part-time students receive no fee remission or grant aid, but it is full-time education done by people in their spare time; people actually do more hours than those on the full-time degree’, and, conversely, in one university it is estimated that 50% of its full-time students are in employment for more hours than they actually study.
- ‘By abolishing fees for full-time study the government has contributed to the inequality in society rather than taken it away. In the HEA definition of a student, those who study for less than an academic year do not count at all; this has significant implications for students who wish to study on a flexible basis, such as those who would prefer to study for a single semester.’

Relations with younger students and benefits brought by mature students

- 5.27 Although 18 year olds may refer to them as 'back of the heads', 'because they always sit in front', and some younger students are said to feel overshadowed in tutorials by mature students, the general view is that 18/19 year-old students could benefit from the presence of mature students. Mixing with a range of age groups may reasonably be regarded as part of life experience that higher education should provide.
- 5.28 Generally, staff believe modes of transmission improved as a result of mature students' presence.
- 'Mature students transform the chemistry in class because they bring a whole range of life experiences.'
 - 'They are likely to ask the questions because they have the confidence and are less instrumentalist towards and have an intrinsic interest in learning and are not chalking up results. It is good to have people engaging in issues as ideas rather than just passing exams. I teach things such as parenting skills and it has a lived reality for them.'
 - 'There are advantages in having mature students given the constrained understanding of school leavers resulting from the pushing to get the points.'
 - 'They are more enthusiastic about learning. They bring rich life experience to literary analysis. They are the first to say thank you at end of a course. Even in big anonymous lectures always sitting in front row in my direct vision they nod approval and engage as lecture goes on which is comforting for me as I lecture.'
 - 'Mature students can be experts and keep you on your toes because they are so interested; that has positive effect on discussions in tutorials they always ask questions. It is an overall synergy. They generally do well. They start the ball rolling in seminars; act as co-teachers.'
- 5.29 Yet, accommodating them in larger numbers may produce problems: 'When they were only a small proportion of the population their distinctive needs could be accommodated within the normal system; the necessary extra attention could be provided at the margin of the lecturer's time ... with larger numbers, a separate approach would be necessary.'

Success rate of mature students

- 5.30 Many mature students enter through the normal routes available to all full-time students, and not all institutions have data showing success and drop-out rates. It will be highly desirable for future policy purposes that institutions do collect these data in a nationally consistent form, that they should run across the two third-level systems, and that they should distinguish between those with and those without school leaving certificates. Such data should enable institutions and the HEA to possess the following indicators:
- the retention rate of students on preparatory courses
 - the progression rate to third-level institutions
 - the retention rate of mature students in third-level courses
 - the success rate of mature students in third-level courses.
- 5.31 Although we have no systematic figures of success rates for mature students, we can give some examples:
- of the University College Cork's (UCC) mature student 1996 intake, 74% graduated, 70% with honours degrees. Retention rates for mature students were thought to be better than for the traditional student group and this was seen as a result of the mentoring programme
 - at National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), in 1998/99 of first year mature students, the dropout rate was 8%. This became 7% in 1999/00. There was no major difference between them and other students
 - at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MIC) on the BEd programme, no mature student dropped out in 2000/01 and on the BA programme only one of the ten of the drop-outs was a mature student; this was below the general rate.

5.32 As far as degree classifications are concerned, the figures available are again limited. A future phase of the initiative would benefit from data showing the classes achieved by mature students, broken down under those entering through the CAO scheme, with normal school leaving qualifications (late returners) and those entering through other qualifying schemes (second chance students). The figures available from individual institutions show that mature students as a whole do as well as the school leavers:

- in one institution, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, (MIC), for the 1998 cohort, 40% of mature students gained 2:1s as against 21% of CAO students. In the 1999 cohort, 25% of firsts and of 2:1s each were mature students. At the lower end, mature students were also more highly represented than the CAO route (but only three mature students were at the bottom). 80% passed in the first year and most others got through on further attempts. 73% received honours - about the same as the school leavers
- at National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) mature students generally get 2:2s
- at University College Dublin (UCD) if they survive the first two years they do well but the best are young students
- at Dublin City University (DCU) if they survive the first year, they usually complete
- at St. Patrick College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin (SPD) attrition rates for mature students are miniscule but are starting to increase as cohorts increase. There are good outcomes: Mature Graduates' Final Year Results for 1996-2000 showed 8% were awarded firsts, 39% 2:1s; 39% 2:2s and 14% passes.

Employment prospects

5.33 Whilst institutions keep records of the employment destinations of full-time graduates, most are not able to identify employment destinations by graduates' age (and indeed other important variables, such as socio-economic background). For the most part, faculty felt that they do well enough in their courses to take their place with other graduates in the labour market: 'Mature students do not have particular employment problems. Mature students often have different career paths, and do well, particularly if they had relevant experience before taking a degree'. 'Access as mature students makes a revolution in people's careers. They move up from lower to higher or other professional occupational grades.'

5.34 In one college, a comparison of employment of BA mature graduates 1996-1999 prior to entering the course with their employment after completion was encouraging:

- none was employed as a higher professional before, but 3.6% were so employed after graduation
- 6% had been employed as lower professionals; that figure rose to 24.1% after graduation
- 8.4% had become employers or managers – there was none before. 4.8% salaried employees had become 8.4%
- 14.4% had been manual workers; none now was.

Conclusions and recommendations

5.35 The nature of the educational experience emerges as salient. The issues are: the style of education on offer; the extent to which content was changing; the shift towards more continuous assessment; shifts in organisation: modular, and distance education courses (paragraphs 5.1, 5.9, 5.14).

5.36 Students and faculty do not expect the higher education experience to be altered for the sake of mature students. At the same time, universities are opening up to new approaches to education (paragraph 5.3).

5.37 Contributions by the initiative towards other HEA objectives are likely to come about indirectly through learning support or through developments keyed in by teaching and learning units where they exist (paragraph 5.3).

- 5.38 Mature students are generally treated the same as other students (paragraph 5.5). The general view is that 18/19 year-old students benefit from the presence of mature students (paragraph 5.28).
- 5.39 Most mature students express considerable satisfaction with their courses and general treatment. Some students, however, present a formidable list of academic problems (paragraphs 5.16, 5.17). **We recommend that institutions and their departments and academic staff examine admission criteria and procedures and arrangements for teaching and learning (BPGs 32 & 36 - 40).**
- 5.40 Students may need reassurance about their capacity to succeed. Support from academic staff varies and problems are minimised where there is a strong departmental personal tutor system (paragraphs 5.4 – 5.7).
- 5.41 Staffing ratios make academic staff hard pressed (paragraphs 5.5 – 5.7) and make it difficult to offer repeat sessions for students (paragraph 5.18). **We recommend that higher education institutions with support from the HEA give consideration to improving staffing ratios (perhaps made possible by reduced numbers of students) (BPG 35).**
- 5.42 Some areas of central administration are thought to lack attention to the needs of mature students. The problems may be accentuated for part-time students. At the same time we encountered administrators strongly committed to mature student access and meeting their needs (paragraph 5.8).
- 5.43 Aspects of work with mature students might benefit from staff development (paragraph 5.15) **We recommend that higher education institutions and relevant national bodies give consideration to the provision of staff training directed to the concerns of mature students and new ways of learning (BPGs 19 & 33).**
- 5.44 Some examples of courses suited to mature students are noted (paragraph 5.10). Some subjects demand pre-requisite knowledge which most mature students are unlikely to have **We recommend that higher education institutions and their departments and academic staff critically examine admissions criteria and curriculum (BPGs 36 & 37). We also recommend that consideration be given to the funding of a more comprehensive range of preparatory courses (BPGs 16 & 18).**
- 5.45 Flexibility in the delivery of courses will be necessary if Ireland is to recruit many more mature students. There are good examples of part-time and distance education provided for them, but the need to provide adequately for part-time students is not fully taken on board in many institutions. Reference to part-time students in our interviews was rare (paragraphs 5.25 - 5.26). **We recommend that institutions and their departments and faculty are encouraged to move towards more flexible curricula through modular systems and the development of mixed-mode courses involving a combination of open learning materials and face-to-face teaching (BPGs 20 & 41). We also recommend that the relationship between NDEC (Oscail) and higher education institutions is reviewed (BPG 21).**
- 5.46 For many mature students, part-time courses are preferred, or indeed the only means by which they can participate in higher education. There is some considerable discrepancy between the financial burdens faced by full and part-time students. In addition, the present funding methodology is such as to discourage the provision of courses that provide students with greater flexibility than that allowed by traditional full and part-time courses (paragraph 5.26). **We recommend that consideration be given to reducing the differences faced by full and part-time students in respect of fees policy and financial support and that the funding methodology be reviewed to allow the funding of courses that provide students with flexible study arrangements including courses whose duration are less than an academic year (BPGs 7 & 9).**
- 5.47 Examples of success rates for mature students are encouraging (paragraph 5.32). Institutions should routinely collect data showing success and drop-out rates in a nationally consistent form, across the two third-level systems, and they should distinguish between those with and those without school leaving certificates. Such data should enable institutions and the HEA to make use of relevant indicators (paragraph 5.30). **We recommend that higher education institutions (including all major providers of part-time courses, such as the Open University) in collaboration with HEA consider the collection of comprehensive data on a routine basis (BPGs 4 & 22).**

5.48 Whilst institutions keep records of the employment destinations of full-time graduates, most institutions are not able to identify employment destinations by graduates' age. For the most part, faculty felt that mature students do well enough in their courses to take their place with other graduates in the labour market (paragraph 5.33).

CHAPTER 6. SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL CONCERNS OF MATURE STUDENTS

Social concerns

- 6.1 The accounts of hardship and difficulty were detailed and sustained. For example, 'I am single but it is hard to make up shortfall in income so I have to work part-time which adds to the pressures of studying and I have to fit in a social life sometime as well'.
- 6.2 Distance and physical access are a problem not only in institutions serving diffusely populated areas but also in the larger towns and cities where public transport and poor road infrastructure make travel difficult.
- 6.3 There is evidence that women with children are far less likely than other possible entrants to take up higher education. A study undertaken in three Dublin colleges of mature students and family responsibilities (Cregan, 1998) showed that well over half of the full-time respondents had no children under 18 years of age, 50% of the respondents had no children at all and few of the male respondents had children. According to the 1996 census, 55% of households had children residing in them. This would suggest that full-time education is a more accessible option for mature students without family responsibilities which confirms the findings of the International Adult Literacy Survey (Hickey et al., 1998). Over 62% of the respondents in the sample of part-time students had no children at all, a higher figure than the full-time respondents, and only 19% of the female respondents had children, whereas 57% of the male respondents had children. All of the children of respondents in this sample were under 18. In this group, women with dependent children are hardly visible.

Financial concerns

- 6.4 Financial concerns weighed heavily on many students (although some were retired people well able to cope). Here are some of their views:

'I have to ask for money from my husband as I get no grant. My husband's income is taken into account but I am not his daughter! I do not exist in this state – I have no identity of my own just an appendage to my husband which I object too. A lot of women my age (middle-aged) would not think of going to college for that reason. My husband could say go and work in a shop. If you are home for years rearing a family it should count for something in terms of a grant.'

'It is a huge problem how you qualify for grants. They look at my income for last year and this does not pay your mortgage and feed your children so there is a conflict there. I am appealing for a mortgage subsidy that was turned down even though they are trying to get more males in primary teaching. The country is awash with money at the moment'. 'We have worked and paid taxes so should have help. To get the Back to Education Allowance you have to be unemployed for six months so there is a problem of how you qualify.'

'I am spending a lot of my small budget on teaching materials for teaching practice.'

'You need a grant for buying books and child-care costs.'

- 6.5 Mature students taking full-time courses may be entitled to a grant or a 'Back to Education Allowance (BTEA)'. Eligibility to a grant is calculated on the basis of the candidate's income; this includes the income of the student's spouse. If a mature student is deemed dependent on his/her parents, parental income is taken into account. The Points Commission (1999) on Fees and Grants noted the criticism levelled against the current level and availability of grants for full-time students and recommended that further consideration should be given to this issue (pp 99-100).
- 6.6 The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) is an educational opportunities scheme for unemployed people, lone parents and people with disabilities wishing to enrol on approved second or third-level courses. BTEA is paid for the duration of the course, including holidays, and successful applicants are allowed to work without any effect on their BTEA payment. In addition a Cost of Education Allowance is payable at the start of each academic year.

- 6.7 A number of students confirmed their reluctance to depend on their spouse's income. 'My children are grown up but my friends are non-existent. I think I have been out socially twice since September because science takes up a lot of time. I don't iron anymore! I miss my financial independence and hate having to ask my husband for a few bob. But we do get a grant from (the university) which is great.'
- 6.8 Others complained that, after a period of independence, they had to rely on the support of their parents which involved a reluctant return to the family home. Clearly, many students from all backgrounds had to overcome financial problems in order to become full-time students. While the provision for full-time students is not generous it is much better than that available to part-time students. There are said to be unfilled places on evening part-time degree courses because of fees. It is difficult to justify the present position whereby young students are given priority over deserving mature students whose only route may be part-time courses. The harsher fees regime faced by part-time students is, but only to a limited extent, mitigated by the fact that they can claim tax relief on fees, but the relief is available only at the standard rate of 22% (the top rate is 42%). The relief is, of course, of no benefit to those whose income does not render them liable to tax. These views are confirmed and expanded upon in Part III, which analyses the views of the students who responded to our questionnaire survey. Financial issues were a major concern to all the groups targeted in the survey, both full and part-time.

Conclusions and recommendations

- 6.9 Our evidence supports that of other studies, namely, that support for full-time mature students is inadequate and even less adequate for part-time students, the recruitment of whom is essential for the success of the nature access policy. More detailed conclusions are:
- accounts of mature student hardship and difficulty are detailed and sustained (paragraph 6.1)
 - distance and physical access are often a problem (paragraph 6.2)
 - women with children are far less likely than other possible entrants to take up higher education (paragraph 6.3).
- 6.10 Financial concerns weigh heavily on many students (although some are retired people well able to cope) (paragraph 6.4) including dependence on spouse's income (paragraph 6.5) and relying on the support of their parents (paragraph 6.8).
- 6.11 There are said to be unfilled places on evening part-time degree courses because of fees. The harsher fees regime faced by part-time students is, but only to a limited extent, mitigated by the fact that they can claim tax relief on fees, but the relief is available only at the standard rate of 22% (paragraph 6.8).
- 6.15 **We recommend that consideration be given to reducing the differences faced by full and part-time students in respect of fees policy and financial support (including child-care costs), and that tax relief should be better related to the position of mature students (BPGs 7 & 8). We also recommend that support be given for fees paid by distance education students on low incomes, including those on courses offered by accredited providers from outside the state (BPG 23).**

CHAPTER 7. EVALUATION BY INSTITUTIONS

- 7.1 The HEA in its recent publication *Promoting Equity in Higher Education* (Skilbeck and Connell, 2000) emphasised the need for a critical and ongoing evaluation of all initiatives at third-level in order that information about successful schemes can be disseminated and aspirations for equity realised. Universities are required to have quality assurance reviews, but, for the most part, institutions are not systematically evaluating their mature access initiatives, although some attempts can be noted. One college (MIC), for example, proposes with the help of the initiative to co-ordinate research on mature students to include a profile of mature entrants, exam results, attrition rates and the first destination of mature graduates. Specific evaluation has included evaluation of an induction day for mature students; some revision is envisaged for the coming year in line with student feedback. A funded Learner Support Unit has been evaluated by the Quality Review process for the whole college. A major student survey was directed to all students. There is informal evaluation with students at end of term providing feedback.
- 7.2 At Trinity College Dublin (TCD)'s preparatory course, evaluation is substantial. Its procedures include:
- (i) student evaluation: there are reviews at the end of each term and each course is reviewed individually by students using a confidential form
 - (ii) group evaluation with tutors. The co-ordinator facilitates that by getting students to look at various issues as a group and make recommendations for the following year e.g., relations with tutor
 - (iii) each strand of the course is overseen by course organiser who works in the College; the quality control staff work on an on-going basis and are met every month to recommend amendments.
- 7.3 The university intends to collect data on:
- recruitment*
- profile of applicants
 - approaches taken in selection
 - effectiveness of the established recruitment process
 - support required by departments to carry out effective recruitment
 - models of good practice for feeding back information to unsuccessful candidates
 - ways in which departments could attract mature students
 - recruitment practices employed in universities both nationally and internationally
- performance*
- factors which contribute to successful completion
 - shortfall in skills and knowledge
 - subject areas that require additional tuition
 - other needs that interfere with performance, e.g., child-care, finances, culture differences.
- 7.4 This is regarded as a formative self-evaluation. 'We would like to think of the programme as a research exercise and get people involved from the departments to look at our aims for the course and then evaluate for us to see if we have successfully achieved the aims, taking from the students' viewpoints as well as our own and see if they are being adequately prepared.'

Conclusion and recommendation

- 7.5 Systematic self-evaluation of mature student access and progress on the lines suggested above seems essential if support for further initiatives is intended. **We recommend that HEA should require institutions to systematically evaluate their initiative-related activities (BPG 25).**

Part III: The Student Survey

CHAPTER 8. INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND AND RESULTS

8.1 Sections 8.2 - 8.23 of this chapter provide an introduction and background to the student survey, along with a summary of the results. The remaining sections of the chapter, sections 8.24 - 8.156, comprise a more detailed analyses of those results by groups of students; it will enable those readers who wish to do so to peruse the detailed results of the comprehensive data-sets produced by the survey.

Introduction

8.2 In this part of the study, we were asked to:

- compare the profile of the target groups to the profile of the adult population that have not accessed higher education
- compare the success rates of full-time and part-time mature student applicants in obtaining places to those of younger applicants
- report on the views of the target groups
- make recommendations in relation to the provision of the additional 10,000 mature student places.

8.3 We were unable to compare the profile of the target groups to that of the adult population who have not accessed higher education as not all the relevant data were available to us. However, the table below compares the population of our target groups, by age group, with that of the Irish population as taken at the 1996 Census.

Table 8.1 Comparison of the population of the target groups by age group with that of the 1996 census population

	Target Groups	% population	Census Population (1996)	% population
23-24	(64)			
25-29	117	74	1,016,091	48
30-44	236			
45-54	89	19	412,047	19
55-59	16	3	153,807	7
60-64	8	2	137,946	7
65+	12	2	413,883	19
N/K	(14)			
Total*	478	100	2,133,773	100

(* Total and percentages exclude the target age group 23-24 and N/K)

8.4 We were asked to compare the success rates of mature and young students applying for places on full and part-time courses. In terms of full-time courses, we relied on the CAO to provide us with data. The data we received present only part of the picture as it does not capture those many mature students who enter universities through some sort of special/direct arrangements. Nevertheless, the data supplied by CAO show that in 2000/01 55% of mature applicants received an offer compared to 58% of all applicants. Of those mature applicants receiving an offer, 66% accepted it, the same percentage as the overall acceptance rate. This presents a more favourable picture than that offered by previous research (see paragraph 2.22). So far as part-time courses are concerned the majority of entrants are mature and the number of unsuccessful applicants is quite low. In general, institutions are not able to fill all their places and the only reason why an applicant would be rejected is the belief that they would not be able to benefit from the course

8.5 The main focus of this part of the study concerned the profiles and views of the target groups and our recommendations regarding the 10,000 places are discussed in Chapter 9 of this report. The following sections contain a brief background to the survey that was undertaken, a summary of the results and a more detailed analysis of each of the target groups.

Background to the survey

8.6 Four groups were included in the survey

- mature applicants who were successful in gaining entry to third-level courses (both full and part-time)
- mature applicants who were unsuccessful in gaining entry to third-level courses (both full and part-time)
- mature students who were attending preparatory courses (i.e., foundation, access or return to learning courses) in third-level institutions
- mature students taking Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses.

8.7 The survey covered students in the institutes of technology as well as the universities and colleges. Random 1 in 5 samples of successful and unsuccessful mature student applicants to full-time undergraduate courses were obtained with the help of the CAO. In those universities that require mature students to apply direct to them for full-time study, we secured their help in gaining our sample. For our sample of mature applicants to part-time undergraduate study and preparatory courses, we relied on the help of the universities and the institutes of technology (although not all the institutes of technology provided part-time courses). The majority of samples we received from institutions was random 1 in 5, although in some cases questionnaires were given to mature students in lectures and seminars. We also sought the help of six Vocational Education Committees in securing our random sample of mature students on PLC and VTOS courses.

8.8 The questionnaires were intended to seek students' views about their reasons for coming to higher education as mature students, the barriers to participation, details about the course they applied for or the one on which they enrolled, their perception of the recruitment and selection processes, and, if granted admission, their views on their experience of higher education so far, the appropriateness of existing provision of places for mature students in Ireland, and on possible developments in the provision of places. We also sought information about the respondents themselves such as their gender, age, occupation, country of citizenship/birth, ethnicity, and any disabilities and carer responsibilities they might have. In addition to close-ended and multiple choice questions, we included a set of open-ended questions. Examples of the questionnaires are reproduced in Appendix 3 – those for successful and unsuccessful applicants to third-level courses. We were able to pilot them at group meetings with students at the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and University College, Galway.

8.9 Questionnaires were sent out on two occasions during the course of the study. The first dispatch resulted in a very low response rate. As a consequence those institutions with a particularly low rate were asked to send out the questionnaires once again. The following table shows, for each target group, the numbers of questionnaires dispatched and finally returned.

- 2.21 In any event, the population of mature students is changing and the changes need to be monitored. One college, St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin (SPD), has noted that during the years 1993-1996, over half of its mature entrants were aged 35 and under. Between 1998-2000 the age profile shifted; 56% of its mature entrants fell into the 36-55 age bracket. There was also a shift in the gender composition of the students, from 64% female in the 1993-1996 BA entrants to 75% female in the 1998-2000 BA entrants.
- 2.22 Whilst we must record that several interviewees in the institutions believed that there was not a substantial reservoir of potential adult students, at least for full-time courses, Clancy has shown (Clancy, 1999) that the level of mature demand is not fully reflected in the enrolments achieved. In the 1997 intake through CAO, 66% of all applicants received an offer, but only 50% of mature students did so. But 80% of the mature students who received an offer accepted it, compared with the overall acceptance rate of 75%. In comparison, CAO data for 2000/01 show that 55% of mature student applicants received an offer compared to 58% of all applicants. Of those mature applicants receiving an offer, 66% accepted it – the same percentage as the overall acceptance rate. Offers to, and acceptances by, mature students are now in line with the overall rates – possibly due to the targeted initiative. However, it is commonly accepted that the potential cohort of mature students is not as large as it was a few years ago because of the economic position. If there is a reservoir, its outflow is meagre.

Practices of other European countries

- 2.23 Comparisons with the policies and practices of other European countries are not easily made because they vary in the ages at which school leavers begin and end their third-level courses. In many countries, there is no clear distinction between full and part-time students who may be few in number, and fees are not charged to any student on a degree or other undergraduate level course
- 2.24 Central and institutional encouragement of mature access can be compared on several dimensions: encouragement through publicity, support to students and institutions, flexible entry requirements, providing foundation and access courses, and providing educational fare appropriate to mature students.
- 2.25 Generally, there have been few policy moves or active national publicity campaigns encouraging the recruitment of mature students. Exceptions are Sweden, where they have long made special entry arrangements for students of 25 years or over, in the UK where recently universities have been given a 5% grant premium for students over 25 years, and Ireland whose policy declarations and targeted initiative have placed it ahead of most other countries. Indeed, in some countries there are disincentives to older students. Thus, in the Netherlands and Germany student funding ceases after the age of 30. In Greece, entry is highly competitive; access to its Open University (OU) has an upper age limit of 44 and requires formal educational qualifications.
- 2.26 In most countries, those seeking admission to full degree courses face tests which, without differentiation for age, constitute a relatively high hurdle. In France, and most German states, adults with job experience but without entry qualifications can follow first degree courses, but few do so. In France, they can have access to APEAL (accreditation of prior education, achievements and learning) but departments vary in their willingness to accept such students.
- 2.27 The mainly centrally regulated admission system in Sweden for many years has favoured mature at the expense of young students, in terms of availability of places (Kim, 1998). Admission for older students is facilitated by the '25-4 scheme' (for applicants lacking upper-secondary education or older than 25 years of age, with more than four years of work experience and competence in English and Swedish). Once admitted, however, mature students are treated in the same way as younger students. No fees are charged. About 50% of students are 30 years or older, or entered higher education studies at 25 or older. About 25% of the students are part-time and about 10% follow distance education. The government is trying to encourage the institutions to offer more part-time and distance education courses - but they are slow to respond, partly because the performance-based resource allocation system makes it costly for them to offer such opportunities.
- 2.28 In Spain, adults older than 25 years may enter without a secondary qualification, perhaps with special examinations to enter specific programmes. They can apply for a regular grant, but are unlikely to get one. Many are in employment and thus ineligible. There is no part-time status, though mature students

enrol for fewer credits, but this does not give them a special status. An admissions test is required for distance education and no allowance made for mature students. The Distance University with an enrolment of about 140,000 students takes most of the adult students. Of the total number of students (over 1.5 million), over 400,000 were 25 or older.

- 2.29 The UK stands out in its numbers of mature students who constituted 51% of the UK-domiciled first year undergraduate student body in 1999. Of those studying part-time, 66% were over the age of 30 (HESA, 2001). Other European students enter at a slightly older age than their UK counterparts but, with the possible exception of Sweden, there are hardly any mature students. Whilst the considerable growth in numbers of mature students in the UK cannot be ascribed to a concerted national initiative, full-time students are eligible for the student support in the same way as are other students, with some additional support funding for students over 25 on full-time courses.
- 2.30 In some countries there are claimed to be some movements in curriculum and modes of delivery to meet the needs of life long learning, but these cannot be generalised and are of uncertain robustness. Academics in more than one country maintain, however, that they require the same disciplinary basis to their studies as do other students.
- 2.31 It will thus be seen that there are no clear models of mature access and treatment that can be drawn from other European experience. Woodrow et al. (2000) have noted, in the broader context of life long learning, that 'of all the five official interpretations ... (i.e., of Finland, France, Ireland, Germany and the UK), it is ... that of Ireland which conveys the most hope and inspiration for the development of a 'social inclusion' model of higher education'. The targeted initiative does put Ireland ahead of most countries in respect of attempts to build up mature student access.

Conclusions and recommendations

- 2.32 The proportion of mature students in Ireland, when compared with most developed countries, is low. The official statistics may well, however, overstate the differences (paragraph 2.3).
- 2.33 Fees are waived for full-time students but part-time students, with some exceptions, are liable for them. This must inhibit their recruitment (paragraphs 2.12 – 2.16). **We recommend that consideration be given to reducing the differences faced by full and part-time students in respect of fees policy and financial support (BPG 7).**
- 2.34 By October 2002, the number of 18 year olds will have dropped by 8,500 or 12% from its peak. Between 2002 and 2007 there will have been a further decline of 12,000, another 20% drop. This will present the third-level education with a severe recruitment problem (paragraph 2.17).
- 2.35 There is a reservoir of qualified potential mature students. Many who did not qualify are of the requisite ability to do so as second chance students. The level of mature demand is not fully reflected in the enrolments achieved (paragraphs 2.20, 2.22).
- 2.36 The population of mature students is changing and the changes need to be monitored (paragraph 2.21). **We recommend that such monitoring be centrally directed in collaboration with higher education institutions (BPGs 3 & 4).**
- 2.37 There are no clear models of mature access and treatment that can be drawn from other European experience. The HEA targeted initiative does put Ireland ahead of most countries in respect of attempts to build up mature student access (paragraph 2.31).

CHAPTER 3. NATIONAL POLICIES

Legislation

3.1 Increasing mature student access is perceived as a key policy objective and this is reflected in statutory provisions. Section 3 of the Higher Education Authority Act, 1971, prescribes one of the functions of the HEA as 'promoting the attainment of equality of opportunity in higher education'. Under Section 12 of the Universities Act, 1997, universities are required 'to facilitate life long learning through the provision of adult and continuing education'. 'A governing authority shall ... promote access to the university ... by economically or socially disadvantaged people and by people from sections of society significantly under-represented in the student body' (Section 18) and 'prepare a statement of the policies of the university in respect of (a) access to the university and to university education by economically or socially disadvantaged people, by people who have a disability and by people from sections of society significantly under-represented in the student body, and (b) equality, including gender equality, in all activities of the university' and shall implement the policies set out in the statement (Section 36). Under Section 49, the HEA has an advisory and review role in relation to statements of equality and their implementation. Similar requirements are stated in the Regional Technical Colleges Act, 1992 and the Dublin Institute of Technology Act, 1992. The Equal Status Act, 1999 includes age among the categories which must not be discriminated against and relates directly to 'a university or any other third-level or higher-level institution, whether or not supported by public funds'. The Employment Equality Act, 1998 forbids discrimination in entry to vocational training.

Actions of HEA

3.2 The Higher Education Authority has addressed the issue through a range of activities:

- it has commissioned a study which gives an international perspective on equity and access in higher education (Skilbeck and Connell (2000) *Access and Equity in Higher Education: An International Perspective on Issues and Strategies*). This noted progress achieved but also that it was uneven. It noted five broadly defined groups featuring in the international equity debate: low socio-economic status; women and girls; mature age and part-time students; ethnic and other minority groups; people with a disability. The approaches included: securing sound information; focused attention on the most obdurate problems; comprehensive legislation and regulatory frameworks; setting clear goals and incentives and performance measurement; cross-sectoral policies and well defined needs-based funding. Strategies for higher education should be set within an 'educational equity chain', extending from early childhood to postgraduate education
- a further study evaluated the targeted initiative on widening access for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Osborne and Leith (2000) *Evaluation of the Targeted Initiative on Widening Access for Young People from Socio-economically Disadvantaged Backgrounds*)
- hosted a forum *Promoting Equity in Higher Education* (October 2000)
- since 1996 provided targeted funding for access initiatives to higher education
- advised the Minister on issues in relation to equity in higher education, for example, through an input into the work of the Action Group on Access to Higher Education and the Task Force on Life Long Learning

3.3 All aspects of the mature learning experience were examined in the context of the White Paper, *Adult Education: Learning for Life* (July 2000) with a view to future legislation governing the area. It recommended a competitive Targeted Higher Education Mature Student Fund which, on a phased basis, would rise to £10m a year to increase mature student participation in higher education (pp 143–144). It noted and recognised the importance of distance education, and stated that the National Adult Learning Council and HEA should prioritise an exploration of 'mechanisms to provide financial support for initial course development work targeted at strategic areas, maximising the use of ICT and broadcasting in delivery (p 145). In the context of part-time fees, the White Paper does not recommend a general programme of free fees, except for those persons (and their dependants) who are medical cardholders,

recipients of the welfare/health payments or Family Income Supplement (pp 145–146). The National Development Plan (www.irishgov.ie/finance/publications/otherpubs/ndpindex.htm) identified, as a funding priority, within the context of overall employment and human resource development, meeting particular and diverse needs of groups in society and the facilitation of life long learning, including the provision of accessible and flexible routes of progression between different sectors of the education system.

Literature on the issue

- 3.4 The mature student issue has attracted a wealth of policy and academic statements which bear witness to its current salience. To its credit, the Higher Education Authority has commissioned research studies which address the broad issue of disadvantage, and the Department of Education and Science has initiated major enquiries into the issue. We summarise here their main findings as the background to our own study.
- 3.5 The reasons adduced for a low rate of mature access are demographic, socio-economic factors and student finances. These include:
- high birth rates leading to large numbers of school leavers and high levels of emigration (Clancy, 1999)
 - retention of fees for part-time students (while those for full-time students were abolished) (White Paper, *Adult Education: Learning for Life*, 2000)
 - under-representation continues to be a problem, especially students from the lower socio-economic groups, with disabilities and some ethnic minorities (others include women, mature and part-time students). Barriers are financial support and the prevailing ‘cultural norms’ in universities (Skilbeck and Connell, 2000)
 - financial support and the prevailing ‘cultural norms’ in universities (Lynch, 1997; Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998; Skilbeck and Connell, 2000)
 - while Ireland is average for recruitment to the tertiary level, it is significantly below average for the upper secondary level (*Report of the Review Committee on Post Secondary Education and Training Places*, 1999).
- 3.6 Additional places for mature students may not be enough. Skilbeck and Connell (2000) point out that those of mature age most likely to (re)enter higher education ‘have successfully completed secondary education, may also have tertiary level qualifications, are established in a career and seek professional advancement ... Increased provision for mature age students does not of itself provide extra places for the socially and economically disadvantaged. Additional measures are needed’ (p 10). Measures might include ‘better procedures for credit recognition and transfer, access courses, alternative entry arrangements, improved status and recognition of vocational courses, linkages between public and private providers, and involvement of the employment sector, franchising, financial incentives and support, and the establishment of partnerships among providers as in distance education consortia’ (p 10).
- 3.7 The proposals for action made in the policy and academic literature can be grouped as concerned with:
- (i) numbers
 - (ii) national and strategic policy
 - (iii) finance
 - (iv) institutional action
 - (v) entry routes, accreditation and access
 - (vi) data collation
 - (vii) study conditions and support.
- (i) *Numbers*
- investment in third-level places leading to 114,000 full-time places in 2001 would allow Ireland to make undergraduate provision for traditional school leavers

- by 2005, third-level institutions should be setting aside a quota of mature students of at least 15% (*Commission on the Points System, Final Report and Recommendations*, 1999, p 115) that is, 10,000 places, to be built up over a period of years (Review Committee, 1999, p 2), primarily through part-time courses, for at least 80% of admissions (White Paper, *Adult Education: Learning for Life*, 2000) and other flexible options such as distance learning
- by 2015, this target might be raised to 25% - to bring Ireland closer to the average participation rate in OECD countries. With some exceptions, the 15% quota should apply to all courses, and to those mature students 'who are assessed other than on the basis of their school-leaving qualification' (Commission on the Points System, 1999, p 115-6)
- before places are provided, demand should be validated by appropriate market research on the target population to determine the extent of demand, the courses sought and the most appropriate method of provision (Review Committee, 1999)
- at present more than 80% of places occupied by mature students are part-time places. The proportion of flexible places within additional provision should be at this level (Review Committee, 1999).

(ii) *National and strategic policy*

- whilst universities responded positively to a targeted initiative to facilitate the participation of school leavers from less well off backgrounds, it was now appropriate to consider a more coherent national approach. The HEA should establish a reporting mechanism for institutions with clear performance indicators and consult universities about the development of a national framework for improving the current situation (Osborne and Leith, 2000, pp 29-31)
- second chance education could provide a solution to the problems of skills shortages and unemployment (Clancy, 2000; Commission on the Points System, 1999), to help those seeking second chance education and to redress the balance towards a more equitable and inclusive society. This implied a cultural shift from stressing the importance of immediate entry to third-level for school leavers (Commission on the Points System, 1999)
- increased flexibility, including part-time and distance learning, workplace delivery, and mechanisms for the accreditation of prior learning and work based experience will be essential in making provision for mature students' (Review Committee, 1999; White Paper, *Adult Education: Learning for Life*, 2000).

In September 2000, the Minister for Education and Science set up an Action Group on Access to Higher Education. The three main groups identified in the terms of reference of the Action Group were:

- disadvantaged school leavers
- mature students
- students with a disability

The work of the Action Group has recently been published with the report recommending that a single co-ordinating body – the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education – be established within the HEA. The purposes of the office would include drawing up policy proposals and overseeing the implementation of the national programme in liaison with the Department of Education and Science and other stakeholders.

(iii) *Finance*

- there should be a higher education mature student fund to rise to at least £10m a year 'to enable third-level institutions to make innovative strategic shifts towards adult-friendly policies'. Fees will no longer apply to ... part-time students who are means-tested social welfare or unemployment payment recipients or dependants, medical cardholders or dependants, or Family Income Supplement holders or dependants' (White Paper, 2000). The Department of Education

and Science and the Higher Education Authority should develop a fund to support part-time undergraduate third-level courses (Commission on the Points System, 1999).

(iv) Institutional action

- 'the absence of a strong case for widening access (the 'rhetoric of access') results in a defensive approach to the issue in some universities' (Osborne and Leith, 2000, p 31)
- universities should mainstream widening access to demonstrate their commitment to equity. Academic staff could not continue to view widening access as a lowering of standards (Osborne and Leith, 2000).

(v) Entry routes

- third-level institutions would need to develop alternative entry routes from that of the Leaving Certificate. Regional partnerships between universities and with other third-level colleges should be encouraged (Osborne and Leith, 2000)
- there was a need for clarity about whether access courses guarantee access to third-level courses. There should be more coherence and standardisation of access schemes at the national policy level (Osborne and Leith, 2000; Commission on the Points System, 1999)
- there should be mutual recognition of institutions' access programmes and transferability (*Lifelong Learning* 1998; Osborne and Leith, 2000, p 31). The recently established National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) will fulfil an important function in this regard
- the application and selection process for mature students was not uniform across the sector. Simplification and co-ordination through the Central Applications Office (CAO) were required, by autumn 2002 (Commission on the Points System, 1999).

(vi) Data

- there were inadequate data for tracking and monitoring students once they gained access and this needed to be rectified by the HEA (Osborne and Leith, 2000).

(vii) Study conditions and support

- there was a lack of guidance and counselling for mature students seeking entry to higher education (Commission on the Points System, 1999).

Conclusions

- 3.8 Increasing mature student access is perceived as a key policy objective and this is reflected in statutory provisions (paragraph 3.1).
- 3.9 The Higher Education Authority has addressed the issue through a range of activities (paragraph 3.2).
- 3.10 The policy issues are thus well explored in the official and academic literature (paragraphs 3.4 – 3.7). The literature:
- makes a strong case for extra places to accommodate more mature students and proposes a quota for second chance students
 - contains a clear indication of the need to emphasise part-time and other more flexible forms of delivery
 - argues for a change in the financial basis on which mature students may complete their third-level education

-
- proposes the strengthening of alternative access routes (including accreditation of prior and experiential learning - APEL)
 - suggests the streamlining of applications procedure and criteria
 - advances the need for adult friendly institutional policies and support mechanisms.

Part II: HEA Targeted Initiative on Mature Student Access

CHAPTER 4. THE TARGETED INITIATIVE AND PROVISIONS FOR MATURE STUDENTS

- 4.1 The Higher Education Authority's targeted initiative on mature student access is one of three in the Improving Access category (the other two are disadvantaged students and students with disabilities) intended to provide the opportunity for HEA-funded institutions to work with the HEA in new areas of strategic importance in higher education and to promote equality of opportunity. All the targeted initiatives are a continuation and development of the initiatives inaugurated in 1996. Funding is provided in each case on the basis of proposals made by the head of each university and HEA-funded institution.
- 4.2 The principles underpinning the schemes were consolidated in 2000 and remain in place for 2001:
- (i) Targeted Initiatives are in areas of strategic national or regional importance within higher education, as determined by the Minister for Education and Science and/or the Higher Education Authority. There is deemed to be a national imperative to continue with effective programmes to increase participation of groups in higher education which are currently under-represented, including mature students, as well as disadvantaged students and students with disabilities.
 - (ii) The HEA has stated that the shape of the framework for the targeted initiatives is for the medium term so that there is a clear consistency of its policy. This will mean greater security as regards the availability of funding for institutions and they could therefore seek funding for a number of years.
 - (iii) Following the report by Osborne and Leith (2000), the HEA survey on Provision for Students with Disabilities and this current project on mature students, one of the key issues that has been raised is the need to ensure that there is a commitment to the mainstreaming of access initiatives in higher education institutions. It is widely recognised that mainstreaming funding is not the only requirement for mainstreaming access programmes and that within institutions equity in access opportunities needs to be placed in the main body of policy making and internal academic and resource decisions.
 - (iv) There is a requirement for institutions to use some of their own resources (including funding from the Exchequer) and/or private resources as a substantial counterpart (a guideline of at least 30% is proposed, other than in the case of initiatives which are in the early stages of development) to supplement funding from the HEA under the scheme.
 - (v) Each institution is asked to report annually on actions funded under the programme.
 - (vi) The effectiveness of funding under each initiative, including the Improving Access initiative, are to be independently evaluated on a regular basis by the Higher Education Authority and the findings of the evaluations will be disseminated.

The nature of the initiative

- 4.3 The seven universities and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MIC) and St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin (SPD) were funded to undertake initiatives in the area of mature student access.
- 4.4 The HEA did not seek to prescribe detailed modes of actions to the recipients of its grants under the targeted initiative, a point noted gratefully in some institutions which feel that they have been free to try out a variety of schemes. It indicated, however, the types of proposals that received funding in the past and therefore could be inferred to be those that might be favoured in the future. They included:
- provision of out-reach workers
 - training of adult tutors
 - development of courses and course material
 - orientation for mature students
 - guidance and counselling support
 - courses in preparatory skills (study, note-taking, library, and computer usage etc)

- information packs
- mentoring
- development of on-line materials
- promotional materials.

4.5 The HEA also indicated the factors that it would bear in mind in determining allocations. These are helpful indicators in evaluating the utility of the initiative which we return to at the end of this report:

- the extent to which proposals are located within a coherent institutional strategy
- whether projects are new initiatives or will give significant added value to existing programmes
- the capacity to maximise effective use of existing institutional resources and infrastructure
- the sustainability of the projects given that there are not guarantees that the funding will be included in subsequent year's budgets
- the priority afforded by the institution to individual projects seeking targeted funding generally
- the priority given to individual projects seeking targeted funding generally
- the priority given to developing partnerships between colleges and other higher and further education institutions, and with appropriate external bodies, whether public, private or voluntary with a view to supplementing, not supplanting, existing efforts
- provision of evaluation of outcomes and dissemination of results
- contribution towards other HEA objectives e.g., modularisation, innovative teaching methods, gender equality etc.

Costs and scale of the initiative

4.6 The sums provided (Table 4.1) under the mature student initiative below constitute roughly 2% of the £352 million a year HEA spends on higher education. Sums received for the targeted initiative are a matter of public record, but the sums specifically added by institutions to targeted initiative funding are not separately identified and it is plain from interviews that they vary between institutions. In one case 50% of monies spent on the initiative came from institutional funds which for the most part originates from the HEA in the form of the institution's core grant. We give some details of individual use of initiative monies in our institutional profiles (Appendix 1).

Table 4.1 Mature student allocation under targeted initiatives: 1996-2000

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
UCD	50	120	150	250	270
UCC	100	185	200	300	250
NUIG*		84	140	300	325
NUIM		75		100	150
TCD	90	90	100	180	171
UL		12	0	30	130
MIC		10	20	45	89
DCU**			50	80	
SPD		25	20	20	30
TOTAL	240	601	680	1305	1415

* 1998 figure for NUIG includes 40K in respect of a system-wide study regarding promotion of access.

** DCU did not receive an allocation in 2000 as funding was carried over.

4.7 The themes pursued in our visits were:

- institutional arrangements for dealing with mature students and the targeted initiative
- preparation and support for entry to courses
- the student experience of the courses
- educational issues
- social and financial problems of mature students
- costs and resources.

Structures and provisions for mature students

Institutional arrangements: mission statements and actions proposed

4.8 Under Sections 34 and 49 of the Universities Act, 1997 universities are required to prepare a plan setting out the aims of the governing authority for the operation and development of the university and its strategy for achieving those aims. Mission Statements and Strategic Plans are broad statements of aspiration of varying degrees of plausibility and offer no guarantee that what they say will be pursued in the life and work of their basic units. At the same time, they could stimulate the working through of shifts in institutional policies and practice.

4.9 Most institutional statements express some commitment to promoting mature student access. Sometimes these are explicit; in other cases they imply commitment in general statements about widening access and provision for hitherto underrepresented groups. Some of the statements are as follows:

- University College Cork's (UCC) Strategic Development Plan has a section on mature students and life long learning. It refers to UCC as being 'a pioneer in the provision of opportunities for mature students'. It commits itself to meeting a quota of at least 15% of places for mature students
- Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MIC) states in its mission document that it is 'socially inclusive' and in its Yearbook that it is 'a caring institution where there is genuine care and concern for the individual' (*Yearbook, 2000/2002*). Statements of intention on mature student access are made in its Prospectus and Quality Review document
- Dublin City University's (DCU) Academic Plan, soon to be adopted, makes specific reference to life long learning and to helping disadvantaged students but contains no explicit reference to mature students
- University of Limerick's (UL) Strategic Plan states that the University aims 'to ensure that ... students from diverse backgrounds will experience a learning environment which enables them to develop fulfilling careers and contribute effectively to the communities and services with which they become associated'. It specifies general provisions which ought to affect provision

for mature students. Its Planned Actions include reference to improving access for mature students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds

- National University of Ireland, Maynooth's (NIUM) Strategic Plans, 1995-2000 and 2000-2005, specify provision for mature students in which it already has a strong tradition
- in National University of Ireland, Galway's (NUIG) Strategic Plan, which is in line with the Government White Paper on Adult Learning, mature students loom large. Its Strategic Plan of 1995 stated that the university had established 'a most creditable position in facilitating access to mainstream academic course for mature students' (p 40). One of the recommendations in the Plan was that the University 'will sustain its commitment to mature students, will review its criteria for admission and will extend its induction programme for mature students, the majority of whom are at present in Arts' (p 43). The Plans were to be realised by 2000
- Trinity College Dublin's (TCD) application (2000) for HEA funding stated that '... tackling educational disadvantage is now a top priority for the College and the various Access Programmes already funded by the HEA are now central to the College's mission'
- St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin (SPD) makes no specific reference to mature students within the Strategic Plan but it refers to life long learning and changing patterns of recruitment especially in initial teacher education and promotion of widening access
- One of the key change drivers identified by UCD in its Strategic Development Framework, 2000-2004, is changing demographics i.e. 'changing age, gender and socio-economic profile associated with life long learning and increased access to the university' (p5). As part of its strategic development areas, UCD will develop programmes which reflect the changing needs of Irish society. It plans to do so by, amongst other things, significantly increasing access for 'the socially disadvantaged, mature students and other groups with limited access at present' (p 10).

4.10 Almost all of the institutions were already working with mature students before the initiative was launched and accordingly the targeted initiative was, implicitly or explicitly, integrated with other activities. Even, however, in universities explicitly committed to mature student access, with senior academics said to be on board for the targeted initiative, the access policy could be in tension with a determination to uphold a high reputation for research, and the fact that undergraduate places were in demand from well-qualified school leavers. 'The Arts Faculty is bursting with school leavers'. Some interviewees believed that at best their institution was on the brink of a move forward, without as yet adequate structures for advancing the cause of mature students. Some institutions, including both St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin (SPD), Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MIC), University College, Cork (UCC) and the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM) had long reputations for their commitment to entry for a large number of mature students. In most institutions, the targeted initiative did not create the issue, and mostly built on what was already being done, but it heightened attention and provided some resources that were critical to advancing policy and practice.

4.11 In some universities whilst the stated commitment from senior officers and those working on access issues was strong, it might be that 'it is the middle that is of concern, the departmental and faculty heads level'. Some academics were said not to have concern for, or experience of, mature students, and the administrative system was not geared to providing registration, library and other systems for mature and part-time students. In such institutions, however, the targeted initiative was thought likely to help shift the norms. In any event, there was some apprehension, in spite of Dr Fitzgerald's prediction, that the demographic turn-down will make it difficult for universities to fill places with school leavers.

Analysis of institutional activities

4.12 The range of the activities covered by bids against the targeted initiative and those undertaken by institutions funded by a variety of sources, including the initiative, is wide. Table 4.2 includes this full range of activities. An earlier version was sent to institutions for verification and some were good enough to confirm or suggest amendments. The institutional profiles at Appendix 1 refer only to institutional intentions under the targeted initiative.

Table 4.2 Range of activities affecting mature students

	DCU	MIC	NUIG	NUIM	SPD	TCD	UCC	UCD	UL
Planning and organisation				X	X		X		X
Strategic and co-ordinated planning for mature access									
Organisation/dedicated posts for mature student access: Mature Student Officer/ Access Officer/Adult Continuing Education Officer	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Steering Committee		X		X	X	X	X		
Dedicated unit	X	X		X	X	X	X		X
Collaboration with other institutions/sectors	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Recruitment	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Admission targets/quotas									
Targeted recruitment activities	X			X	X	X	X		X
Educational provision		X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Development of preparatory courses									
Development of part-time degree courses	X			X	X		X	X	X
Development of other courses	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
Development of open & distance learning materials	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
Out-reach programmes	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
E-learning	X			X				X	X
Staff development			X	X	X	X			
Travellers/refugees provision			X	X	X		X	X	X
Links with local communities	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Finance				X		X	X		
Studentships or other financial support									
Additional budgetary provision				X	X	X	X		
Recognition of staff for work with part-time students				X					
Support for mature students	X	X		X	X	X	X		X
Induction programme									
Study skill support		X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Careers advice	X	X		X	X		X		X
Crèche	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Evaluation and accreditation	X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Accreditation frameworks etc									
Review/evaluation		X			X	X	X		X
Research			X	X	X	X	X	X	X

4.13 Subsequent sections of this report will discuss some of the more important activities stemming from the initiative in more detail. In Chapter 9 (paragraphs 9.19 - 9.22) we offer suggestions on what further may be done. Here we briefly indicate what seem to be the clearest outcomes, although we emphasise considerable variations between institutions. Although the sums granted through the initiative are relatively modest, they have been used to some effect in that they have:

- in most institutions, generated institutional support to carrying the issue forward through the allocation of responsibility for the initiative to senior roles and/or institutional committees led at a senior level
- allowed the appointment of dedicated staff who act as access or mature student officers. These not only engage in activities of specific importance in enhancing the recruitment and appropriate care for mature students, but also represent a presence on campus in advancing the issue
- such personnel have intensified marketing and recruitment procedures, built up reception and orientation events, offered opportunities in learning skills and techniques, monitored and evaluated student progress and, where necessary, offered mediation with the regular teaching staff
- the initiative has caused some institutions to bring under review selection procedures for mature students
- some institutions have introduced particular courses adapted to the needs of mature students in addition to those already provided e.g., science and or mathematics for mature women returners.

4.14 The initiative was less successful in the following respects:

- in many institutions, it has not led to systematic planning, to include revisions of mission statements, operational plans, budget allocations and staff training to accommodate the needs of mature students. A minority of institutions had already stated, however, independently of the initiative, a target of the proportion of mature students to be admitted
- there is no institution-wide consideration of educational style and delivery appropriate to mature students (although many students do not seek different treatment)
- in most institutions, the benefits experienced by full-time students exceed those derived by part-time students
- some universities have not increased their offer of part-time and distance education as a way to securing the admission of more mature students although some courses have been developed using initiative money
- training is not generally in place to help faculty address the teaching and learning issues raised by the presence of mature students
- no substantial increase in the extent of out-reach work, in addition to that already on offer, can be traced to the initiative.

4.15 Table 4.2 summarises what the institutions are doing for mature students. It shows that the important gaps in relevant action are in strategic planning for mature access, studentships or other financial support, consideration of the educational style and delivery, flexibility of provision, part-time and distance education (paragraph 4.19 - 4.24). **We recommend that higher education institutions give consideration to these issues (BPG 26).**

Institutions' costs and resources

4.16 Once admitted, mature students rightly merge into the general student body. It is not surprising, therefore, that there are usually no specific costings of the extra expenditure engendered by mature students beyond that found by the targeted initiative, although at least two institutions provided additions to initiative

related expenditure. Some of the obvious additional costs incurred are: library services, support services, departmental time. Mature students are more demanding outside class especially about grades if disappointed with marks; interview boards, which students entering on the CAO route rarely have, consume resources although this may be regarded as an investment rather than a cost. Staff development procedures directed towards the teaching and care for mature students should certainly figure among additional costs but do not emerge as a prominent development.

- 4.17 The unit funding system has a number of features that seem to be inhibiting the growth of part-time courses. There is, even in the minds of senior university officials, some uncertainty as to which part-time courses are eligible for funding. The official rubric is that:

‘the courses to be costed are the intra-mural courses recognised by the HEA for the purposes of funding and exclude Adult Education Courses, In-service Training Courses, part-time courses leading to qualifications from professional bodies and other non-recognised extra-mural courses’

‘the net costs of providing these excluded courses, when they arise, are included in the College’s accounts and are regarded as a College overhead to be applied to the recognised courses’.

- 4.18 This definition means that a significant number of courses that serve mature students and that in certain other countries would be treated and funded as part of the mainstream of higher education are not funded in Ireland. Hence, in general the type of part-time courses that would be of particular interest to mature students would not be funded. Such courses have therefore to be run on a cost recovery basis. It is likely that the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) will help overcome this problem through the establishment of a national system for academic credit as this would enable funding to be linked to courses that attract academic credit. It should be noted that for new courses to be recognised for funding they must fall within the scope of the current funding framework.

Sustaining the initiative

- 4.19 In considering how far institutions thought it possible to sustain the initiative, we need to note views about the future of mature student market. Some, irrespective of the initiative, intend to go well above a 15% recruitment rate, and this is already achieved in some subjects in some institutions. Others believe that increases in numbers are necessary, but would be difficult to fully achieve because of recruitment difficulties, or because they are likely to unduly restrict entry of well-qualified school leavers. In general the challenge presented by demographic turn down and the possibility of making more room for mature students are not explicitly worked through in terms of such alternative strategies as providing more part-time and distance learning courses. Some do not foresee ‘a case of there being pent up demand and a need to open the flood gates’. They note that many mature students are not second chance students but highly qualified people who are changing career. Some return because they want a change of subject interest. Some women come back to retrieve the position in which boys always got preference when families could not afford to pay fees for all. Numbers would come from women who have reared their families saying ‘it is my turn now’; there are more of that cohort than any other, a point reinforced by the findings of our student survey. One college has noted a drop in applications but not in women returners.
- 4.20 Some institutional leaders are likely to back continuation of activities under the initiative because they believe mature students bring a great deal to the institution, but not all institutions can be certain about continuation if central funding ceased. At least one university has, however, already mainstreamed its funding.
- 4.21 The specific problems in sustaining the initiative will arise not so much from continuing to advance such practices as marketing courses and working on more appropriate access procedures and curriculum. It is expenditure on access officers, preparatory courses and mature student officers which are the substantive ways in which funds have been used. There is apprehension that temporary staff may not be able to continue without initiative funding. Institutions hope to be able to take at face value the various statements (The White Paper and National Development Programme are quoted) that additional resources will be targeted to these areas. We note, however, that the HEA has recently established the possibility of continuity of initiative funding.

4.22 Institutions therefore present a range in their intentions on meeting the national policy. At the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), over five years, the target number of disadvantaged, mainly adult, students set at 200 in 1999 would increase to 300, to be achieved by increasing access and foundation courses. The two colleges are fully committed to recruiting more mature students who 'bring a whole range of life experiences to the programme', one by nearly 50% in the next 10 years. At another university, it was expected that the projected drop in school leavers was likely to be offset to some extent by an increase in the number of mature students seeking to upgrade professional qualifications or acquire new courses as part of the increased emphasis on life long learning. Yet another, the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM) will look to the potential in part-time, modular and distance education to offset falling numbers, although they are sensible of competing offerings in some areas from employers and institutes of technology, often working in partnership, and from private colleges. At DCU, since 1980, 20% of places are reserved on all programmes for mature students, and a deferred entry scheme is in place to allow students to defer their entry to assist them, inter alia, to mature before taking up their place. At UCC, the objectives of the University include facilitation of life long learning through adult continuing education. It has widened access to degree and diploma programmes for adults.

4.23 This last example evokes a broader policy point, perhaps outside our remit: may not courses devised jointly by employers and institutes rather than attempts to recruit mature students to university courses meet the skills shortages?

Central administration concerning mature students and/or the initiative

4.24 Institutional responsibility for the initiative and for policy on mature students is managed in various ways. The majority, but not all, of the institutions have a steering committee for the initiative and for mature student policy under the chair of a senior academic, a dean or somebody of vice-president level. At one university, all of the programmes for the disadvantaged are within the province of a vice-president, and central concerns are pursued by the adult and continuing education, mature students, and project development officers. Elsewhere responsibility may be shared between a dean and registrar. For the most part, but not everywhere, the level of ultimate responsibility is towards the top of the hierarchy; it is connection between the university and the departments and other units that may still need strengthening.

4.25 In a number of universities, for example, departments or units concerned with adult and continuing education play a significant role in enhancing the institution's work with mature students, both through their links with the local community which encourages mature students to apply and through the support provided once enrolled. In other places the corresponding units are more peripheral and do not greatly impact on the rest of the institution. In one university, the responsibility rests with individual faculties and the central services and with the institution which prefers to treat the issue holistically.

Do initiatives constitute new projects or do they add value to existing work?

4.26 If a great deal of work with mature students, often not identified as such, was already taking place before the initiative was launched, the novelty and added value of the initiative rest in the implication of national support and the ability it confers to make committed appointments and to start preparatory courses. 'It has helped to maintain coherence and energy devoted to mature student recruitment and has allowed new possibilities.'

4.27 Specific additions resulting from the initiative include the appointment of mature students or access officers or Learner Support Units, wholly or partly concerned with mature students (see paragraphs 4.57 - 4.62).

Initiatives independent of targeted expenditure

4.28 All of the institutions have long received mature students although they were rarely identified as a separate target group. Many courses are not part of central funding calculations, are often not listed separately and therefore not taken credit for. They include, for example

- extra-mural courses aimed at community leaders and potential leaders, trade unionists and human resource managers
- an evening Arts programme going back some decades

- out-reach work on Saturdays and in the evenings
- an Access Programme funded (as to 50%) as a targeted initiative, but plans for attracting more mature students were adumbrated earlier
- a Learning Support Unit established before initiative funding
- a University offering several part-time and evening courses. It has departments with a majority of mature students
- an evening Arts programme has routes towards both a four-year and an eight-year degree. One or two year courses in subjects of special interest are offered and an out-reach programme uses courses as building blocks towards a degree at the student's own pace
- in a Department of Applied Social Studies, mature students are now in the majority. In a Social Science degree there are 300 students. Forty percent of places are reserved for mature students
- a degree course in Youth and Community Work has a 100% intake of mature students. It is targeted at marginalised groups and those who work with them: lone parents, travellers, disabled people, and is offered at both the university and as an out-reach course
- a Social Work degree is only for mature students and another in Early Childhood Studies has a 50% mature student intake.

4.29 We have noted how some institutions lay claim to a long engagement with mature students. At UCC, for the last 30-40 years, mature students have played an important role and constitute around 10% of the total. Both MIC and SPD had mature students on BA and BEd degrees before the targeted initiatives. From the inception (in 1993), one of their BA Humanities degree has had a large component in it that addresses mature students and life long learning generally. UCD has a long-established commitment to part-time mature students through its BA Modular programme and many other courses. At NUIM, mechanisms for facilitating access for mature students have become well-established.

Links with other education sectors

4.30 Many of the nine institutions have links with other education sectors some, but not all, of which have arisen from targeted initiatives. Some universities work with institutes of technology to provide joint access or other courses for mature students. A course at the University of Limerick (UL), funded by the initiative, is designed to enable women returners to make informed choices between university and institute of technology environments. The National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) takes a lead role in a Regional Higher Education Network, including five institutes of technology; it furthers research on delivery of courses, and will share expertise and resources. Many have extensive links, too, with community groups, youth groups, the voluntary sector, VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme), other providers in the area (NCEA, NCVA providers etc) and Community Education/Resource Groups as provided through the VEC (Vocational Education Committees). Trinity College Dublin (TCD) is currently in discussion with a number of VECs to devise a series of models for out-reach adult learning and has arranged visits through the Education Units of the Prison Service. Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MIC) has close links with its neighbouring university, complements its arts and education courses and has several joint projects with it. UCC has a good relationship with an IT: they have unwritten agreements about not expanding into each other's territories and have co-operated in establishing a campus in a disadvantaged area. NUIM conducts an out-reach programme in Kilkenny in collaboration with the Institute of Technology, Carlow.

Marketing places to mature students

4.31 Most institutions are not finding it easy to recruit full-time mature students, particularly in some subjects. It can be assumed that those institutions that have used targeted initiative funds to appoint dedicated mature student or access staff will have increased their marketing efforts. Although some make extensive publicity and marketing efforts, the students whom we met said that it is often difficult for people in settings remote from higher education to fully grasp the possibilities of securing access. 'No one is out

there telling us what is available - which could be so easily disseminated.' Mature students may never have been inside a college and do not know whom to contact. Word of mouth or the local press or through friends or relatives who had taken courses or through an education guidance counsellor at a community evening class are the ways in which they might learn of the opportunities, or they might have seen an advertisement in the *Irish Times Educational Supplement*.

4.32 Institutions' attempts to market the opportunities open to mature students are variable. The appointment of access or mature students' officers has to some extent lent focus to such efforts. In the opinion of students whom we met, they have often been insufficient. One university believed, surprisingly, that no overt marketing to mature applicants was necessary because there was a national knowledge regarding its mature intake and it would take a significant resource. In one case, a reader of a recruitment booklet would have to reach page 21 to find the first reference to degrees offered on a part-time basis.

4.33 At the same time, some institutions make considerable efforts. At Trinity College Dublin (TCD), apart from Open Days, its general recruitment efforts included six meetings with branches of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors and representation at 32 careers' exhibitions. 'We go out to recruit to put a face on the institution e.g., to a local prison to speak to the educators of offenders there.' It works with external organisations which provide advice to and assist individuals to further their education, e.g., AONTAS and VTOS. It advertises in the community and national press.

4.34 Across institutions, the range of marketing procedures is as follows:

- advertisements in local and national press and publicity through local radio
- talks given to local colleges
- on open days, special sessions for mature applicants to which both individual applicants and community groups might be invited
- ensuring the active presence of current mature students at open days
- looking at where people go, e.g., churches, the many women's organisations and farming organisations, and using parish and community newsletters
- attendance at annual adult education fairs, the Higher Options Conference and AONTAS exhibitions on adult courses (with mature students attending to talk to prospective students)
- visits to access programmes and extra mural programmes
- recruiting active involvement of mature student societies
- making informal contacts through regional employment offices
- improving use of printed material. For example, Adult Education booklets including a contact name and number for institutions
- distributing posters and brochures widely to e.g., VTOS and access course centres
- presentations at Adult Education Centres offering Vocational Training Opportunities Schemes (VTOS)
- designing a Web page for current and prospective mature students
- making approaches to employers (presumably for block or part-time release)
- liaising with the Irish Council for Refugees.

4.35 A more vigorous and targeted nation-wide campaign through the media was thought necessary by many of the students we interviewed and by those who responded to the student survey (see Part III). For example, the television and other advertising encouraging applicants for 2001/02 to get their forms in on time referred only to school leavers. But local, institutional publicity was also needed. It can be surmised, however, that these efforts would be effective if only made as part of a more holistic effort including the setting of institutional and departmental targets and a clear plan of action with a publicity budget attached to it. Communication is more effective if there is a clear, strong message to communicate.

Preparatory courses

4.36 Preparatory courses preparing mature applicants for third-level education are provided under different labels, including foundation and access courses: we use a generic title of preparatory courses. (Part of our student survey targeted mature students on preparatory courses; the responses we received are analysed in Part III of this report.) Such courses are a significant feature of the targeted initiative in some, but not all, of the institutions and emerge in different forms. They are greatly appreciated by students, and have a good success rate as measured by access to and progression through full-time degree courses. They are

likely to set up good models of recruitment, educational and support practice for wider application with larger numbers. Their leadership is sophisticated and caring and they would make a good site for research and development in this field of activity. Those responsible for them often play an active role in supporting mature students once they join the regular undergraduate courses.

- 4.37 In one example, Trinity College Dublin, of the 67 students registered over the last three years, 29 had left at primary level or secondary school with no certificate. Of the 44 students who registered in 1997 and 1998, 86% completed of whom 84% were offered places at third-level institutions. The course may also have a 'cooling-out' function in that students may discover after all that they do not want to go on to third-level and thus anticipate later drop-out.
- 4.38 The success of this course is thought to be due to:
- funding from HEA and bursaries from the institution
 - small class numbers -- makes for involvement and engagement of tutors and students in all aspects of the course (crucial to adult learners)
 - dedicated guidance time
 - dedicated staff to discuss and help resolve personal issues
 - full-time co-ordinator
 - evaluations - formative and summative
 - flexibility in relation to course content
 - student-centred approach caters for different levels and needs as in Mathematics and IT
 - course organisers' and tutors' commitment and involvement
 - role modelling provided by former students already in the institution
 - foundation course on 'site' gives a realistic experience of the real thing, and building sense of 'ownership' and institutional identity
 - 'family day' to mark the support of families and friends.
- 4.39 The organisers of the course believe that courses need to be delivered on an out-reach basis in one of two ways: three-four mornings a week for young mothers who could get their children into community crèches and a course three-four evenings a week for men 'against whom the current system discriminates. It is almost impossible for them to come back to this course because it is just not flexible enough'. The VECs are interested in partnerships and administering the programme and the university would oversee its academic quality.
- 4.40 At another university, the University of Limerick, the funded mature students' course has had a modest beginning. Students can link with a first year course and secure entry to the university. A gender equity programme is funded under the HEA initiative. It offers a part-time course in science and technology, needed by women returners. Its course team is from both the university and an institute of technology. Press and radio advertisements are used. All applicants are interviewed. The mathematics-learning centre runs a mathematics course for mature and other students. Training in adult education is given to tutors; particular concerns are personal support issues. Learning and personal development support are to be provided in part through a mentoring system. Student support each other at weekend and away days. To help school travel, the course starts at 10.00 am with half an hour for lunch so they can leave at 3.30 pm. Eighteen out of 19 completed the course. Eight proceeded to degree courses. Two were studying at private colleges. Six were in employment or in own business.
- 4.41 University College Dublin offers a Return to Learning Course at its main campus and at up to four out-reach centres. In recent years the courses have recruited over 60 students, of whom about a third are, by virtue of their low incomes, not charged fees. This part-time course predates the targeted initiative but its development has been assisted by targeted initiative funding. The original course is humanities based but a course with a commerce theme has recently been introduced. Just over 70% of students successfully complete the course and, of these, about 70% have gone on to join a third-level course in the subsequent year, although the promotional brochure makes it clear that the course confers no guarantee of admission to degree courses. A majority of the students take courses at other universities, most of which are either in, or reasonably close to, Dublin, as might be expected given the geographical constraints faced by mature students. In the past a majority of the students joined part-time courses but this changed with the abolition of fees for full-time courses, although a sizeable minority still enrol on third-level part-time courses.

4.42 There is some division of opinion about where preparatory work should be located. Some faculty believe that it could be best undertaken in institutions below those of the third-level and that universities should work with further education institutions to that end. We heard that, at some institutions, applicants who have the necessary aptitude, and who are rejected only because of a shortage of places, are being unnecessarily encouraged to take an access course. Also, they can deal with only relatively small numbers, and are expensive per student. However, we consider that there should be encouragement of those preparatory courses where students are guaranteed entry to a third-level course on successful completion of them. There needs to be greater consistency in their terminology and the establishment of a national system of accreditation.

Accreditation and transfer

4.43 As the Commission on the Points System (1999) observed, the position of accreditation and transfer is confusing for potential mature students for a number of reasons. Different courses have different forms of accreditation. Academic units have different approaches to selection. The term access is also used for second-level courses. Whilst some use the title 'access' courses to describe courses which give an automatic right of entry to those who succeed in them, others use the term for courses with no such guarantee. It is to be hoped that the NQAI will help to clarify these positions (see paragraph 4.52).

4.44 It was felt not fair to put people in courses that were not fully accredited; students completing preparatory courses should be able to transfer to institutions offering the course sought after. This would create transferability across the whole of the third-level. There was also support for central benchmarking of accredited prior and experiential learning.

4.45 At one university, few preparatory course students were admitted to a full-time course and many were advised to apply elsewhere after successfully completing it. Successful students, as other mature students, must sit entrance tests which many find formidable. At a further university a credit framework and a credit-based system for the first degree and certificate and diploma courses provide entry routes. Other variations are that some are full-time courses lasting up to one year; elsewhere there are part-time, and/or evening courses. This variation, however, is not disadvantageous because it offers a range of possibilities to would-be students.

Getting in

4.46 Institutions have legal responsibility for admissions and the conditions on which they admit students. But they work within a complex of provisions made by bodies external to themselves, and which offer routes to higher education other than through the school leaving certificate:

- Vocational Education Committees (VECs) provide technical and vocational education for local communities. They include second level, adult and continuing education, community and second chance education (VTOS), PLC courses, prison education and traveller education. VECs are financed by state grants and by local authorities
- the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) courses have been designed to meet the education and training needs of unemployed people. They are certified at a range of levels and include the Leaving Certificate and NCVA Levels I and II
- NDEC (Oscail) provides distance learning courses in collaboration with a number of universities and ITs. It works with university staff and aims to get its courses accredited by all universities. It has 3,500 students. No entry qualifications are required; the average age of students is 44. NDEC teaches students and universities award the degree
- Higher Education Training and Awards Council (HETAC) (formerly the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA)) is the awarding body for the Certificates for students 21 or over and is responsible for ACCS (Accumulation of Credit and Certification of Subjects). Modules earned can lead to a National Certificate or National Diploma equivalent to two years and three years of HE study. A degree can be awarded after a further year of study

- Further Education Training and Awards Council (FETAC) (formerly the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA)) is responsible for Post-Leaving Certificates (PLC) courses provided by colleges. PLC course objectives include enabling progression to higher education or training; approximately 30% of PLC students are over 21. They are further education courses certified by the National Council for Vocational Awards at Levels II or III and can provide a route to the institutes of technology
- the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland's (NQAI) remit does not include the universities, although there is a statement which anticipates 'voluntary co-operation', but its overall mission is to facilitate life long learning and promote access, transfer and progression for all learners.

- 4.47 If mature students have several ways in which they can qualify for admission to third-level education it is difficult for them to get to grips with which prior qualification will enable them to enter what course. There is also the large issue of how far work or more general life experience can count towards qualification for entry. The work of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland will help to disentangle these issues (see paragraph 4.52).
- 4.48 The main route for entry to university is through the CAO; it also allows for special entry to full-time higher education by mature students. There are, however, felt to be problems with the CAO application form on which some mature students apply. It is not specific about the information required; applicants who know their way around the system do best at providing the relevant information. A special form for mature student applications is thought to be needed.
- 4.49 Institutions and departments have different admission policies and in most institutions for most courses only a minority of mature applicants succeed in gaining entry. Some have clarified the numbers of mature students they intend to accept and others have not. Specific procedures are usually set by Programme Boards rather than the institutions, and to some extent this is justified by the different requirements that emanate from the nature of different subject areas; one university could not get Faculty Heads to agree an entire system because each course has different entry requirements. For particular courses, there may be small numbers and specific targets for the departments to set according to policy recommendations.
- 4.50 All institutions allow mature students to enter without the standard Leaving Certificate requirements if they satisfy specially created entry requirements. They vary some preparatory course students may be guaranteed an interview whereas other mature students might not be granted this opportunity. Other mature students are required to sit aptitude and other tests and may get an interview on the basis of that. Opinions divide on the use of interviews as being subjective and it is difficult to document reasons for one person over another. Others favour an interview where they can test motivation, evidence of prior learning and what books applicants have read. Work experience may be considered. Examination results and references may also be requested from those who have taken a foundation, return to learning or VTOS course. Requirements might include a psychometric test or other tests to separate applicants at different levels of ability and a written essay, in some cases to be written before the interview. Advice may be offered to those who are rejected. Some applicants are advised to attend a return to learning course and reapply the following year.
- 4.51 Some thought is going into improving methods of selection. A Learning Support Unit in one college intends to explore how the system could deal with accrediting prior learning. Another college proposes to develop 'a national, transparent, effective and just selection method for mature entry to all higher education institutions to replace the use of psychometric tests which are not 'mature friendly' but are more geared to the Leaving Certificate student skills. It is thus critically evaluating its methods and investigating the potential of alternative psychometric tests to the one currently in use and developing predictive models (based on empirical data) for use in the selection process at national level.
- 4.52 Ireland has not yet established a credit transfer system, although there are plans to do so under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. The new NQAI has the task of setting up the national equivalency tables and ladders of progression. Institutions will generally welcome it, but many, too would welcome a committed initiative from the centre to unify accreditation of prior learning and transferability. There is also some demand for some kind of national benchmarking system of preparatory courses and other forms of prior learning and experience to avoid use of the Leaving Certificate which may not suit everyone to sit as an adult.

Orientation courses and procedures

- 4.53 The evidence from our interviews is that orientation and support given to mature students on entry to undergraduate life are critical to their ability to assimilate well to university work and to reconcile it with their other obligations. Some institutions have used targeted initiative funds to set up or to enhance these activities. One access officer noted: 'The College holds an Induction Day and a reception in the evening for mature students and their families at the beginning of the year ... such a reception helped with the renegotiation of roles that had to take place. They can have a whinge with other partners, so they are not alone. Breakdown in relations can be a serious result of adult education as college is big commitment'.

Child-minding facilities

- 4.54 Almost everywhere, child-care facilities are a problem. This was made clear to us by many of the faculty and administration we met, and the mature students we interviewed. It was also a message that was loudly voiced by many of the respondents to our student survey (see Part III). Although these facilities are outside the ambit of the initiative, they have a direct bearing on institutions' capacity to recruit and support mature students. Some institutions have virtually no or insufficient facilities. Facilities are not flexible enough to help parents meet unexpected crises. Inflexible timetables are not easily reconciled with family obligations, although some part-time and evening courses have timetables enabling children to be left off and picked up from school. Shortage of teaching accommodation may restrict institutions' room for flexibility, even when faculty are willing to meet mature students' timetabling needs. Where a university has a good crèche it is helpful for students living nearby with children under five, but many students have to travel. There is no funding provided for those who cannot use the university facilities. One university has a child-care fund (funded by the European Social Fund) which is able to offer £300 per student.
- 4.55 Individual students tell of difficulties such as:

(a single mother) 'I have no mobile phone and I am not contactable and my mother lives 15 miles away. I would like to be able to leave my timetable with someone in administration so I can be reached in case my son needs me.'

'I have a child who is two and work a 14 hour day on Sundays so I can afford crèche fees so I can go to college. There are tremendous pressures because college hours are 9-6 and crèche hours are 9-5:15 so I have to pay someone two days a week to come and collect my son. I am trying to fit education in my life while for 18 year olds it is their life. No extensions are given and I have to attend tutorial times at 5-6 pm.'

'There is a crèche, but it's not available for short-term use.'

In one university, the tradition has been that children were never seen in the library although if people come along with children to get books, they are allowed in.

- 4.56 The lack of child-minding facilities explains why there are few students with children under 12 on preparatory courses (Cregan, 1998). Students are also concerned that child-minders are not being paid the market rate and that the turnover rate of staff is high. There is little in place institutionally for after-school care, mid-term breaks and school holidays which would take a lot of pressure off mature students. In past years, one university has hired someone to mind children in a room set aside so mature students can attend the programme.

Support

- 4.57 The degree of support afforded to mature students varies by institution and departments within them. One faculty member described it as: 'A wonderful experience on one end and utter abandonment on the other'. In some universities it was felt that they should not be accorded special treatment which would tend to ghettoise them – a view shared by many students. In others there was a level of discontent expressed at some of our meetings with mature students. This did not speak to inadequate caring for them as much as to a general inadequacy applying to all students, a point to which we will return when we discuss

educational approaches (paragraphs 5.12 - 5.25). At the same time, some of the more fruitful examples of uses of targeted initiative funds can be found in the forms of support that are now offered.

- 4.58 The support systems include those provided centrally through various units and designated roles, such as those of mature student officers, and those that emerge from the normal pastoral and tutorial exercise of functions by faculties and departments. The first category includes admission officers, adult and continuing education officers and mature students officers, access officers, counsellors, chaplains, special support units, health service, college tutors, mature student society and disability officers.
- 4.59 It is estimated in one institution that one quarter of the mature students will require some level of additional tuition. Staff may refer students to support units if they identify weaknesses. They have been established under the targeted initiative to 'improve the quality of learning for adult learners at the third-level'. Sometimes there is not a unit but a mature students officer or similar role providing many of the same services. They provide academic and pastoral support, sometimes for the whole student body, but in some cases dedicated to mature students. Support units or officers may help students help themselves to set up independent study groups. Their ambit may go beyond the delivery of services and towards development of, and reflection on, modes of education and social development of mature and disadvantaged students. Some are looking at the whole idea of best practice in access and trying to devise a model that will be flexible, modular and taught in communities. They are a clear benefit deriving from the initiative in introducing into institutions' norms and practices compatible with academic values and criteria, yet carrying forward educational and developmental thinking.
- 4.60 They provide support through pre-recruitment advice, orientation events, teaching and learning support, mediation and, in some cases, evaluation and research. As important, their active approach lends a new dimension of thinking to institutions. Most institutions have created preparatory courses. Some provide educational support through learning clinics. Such posts may form part of a dedicated unit which may continue with responsibility for mature students after entry whilst others lose that responsibility once a student is enrolled. An example of the work of such a unit, now funded under the initiative, is given in Figure 4.1 below:

Figure 4.1. The work of a learning- teaching support unit

- is available to provide one to one consultations and advice on academic issues and strategies
- operates a referral service to the faculty
- provides an academic writing course
- provides pre-session introductory seminars
- provides learner training seminars
- has produced a Study Skills Handbook and a study skills and essay writing web page
- provides Mature Students with a Head Start Programme
- developed stronger links with community and adult education groups
- explored design of a pre-university module
- produced a brochure
- provides a learning support counsellor and one-to-one tutoring on learning e.g., individual pre-exam revision planning and advice on essay writing problems;
- provides a foundation studies module (unit runs a three week course on Academic Writing as part of First Year BA)
- receives students for further support referred by academic staff
- is reviewing best practice on access and trying to devise a flexible model and exploring how could the system deal with accrediting prior learning.

4.61 Other services noted as provided by such units and by other parts of institutions include:

- making the application process easier
- assisting prospective students to evaluate the demands of third-level education, to prepare for entry to college life, and to make informed course choices
- producing a web page containing essential information
- research: student tracking
- co-ordinating the collection of data on the recruitment and performance of mature students
- providing an Induction Day. 'I did not even know what a textbook was and found the sessions on quick reading skills and using an index were extremely helpful'
- providing facilities for a Mature Students Society.

4.62 The support given to mature students in learner support units or preparatory course centres or by mature students officers is often admirable in concept and working but they may be too under-resourced for the tasks facing them. In one institution that prided itself on good relations with students and which offered learner support to all students and with slender resources, mature students felt that there is a lack of support and a lack of communication between the Learner Support Unit and academic departments. '... We have to chase lecturers with a high workload and we are not sure we are even being directed to the right person'.

4.63 Counselling and support systems accordingly have a mediating role. 'Students will often come to us and ask us how to approach an issue with a lecturer ... because without us the situation could have festered and got worse' ... 'Some students ask us whom to approach in English about problems with a novel. In more extreme cases we have had to do role plays to get them used to the idea and it is more to do with a confidence issue'.

4.64 A recurrent point was that staffing practices did not appear to reflect the needs of out-reach programmes such as the time needed for extra support required by students, and the additional travelling time for staff. Nor was remuneration for extra work adequate, particularly since out-reach work affected faculty's ability to undertake the research necessary for promotion. Nor were the inducements needed to encourage full-time staff to teach in the evenings and weekends sufficient.

4.65 Although faculty may feel that mature students relate well together and support each other, many are restricted by lack of finance, convenient residential accommodation, and heavy timetables. The social support issues and issues of academic confidence and psychology combine to make it difficult for them. It is not surprising that mature students make a lot of use of the pastoral facilities. Indeed many of the mature students who responded to our student survey held the view that third-level institutions should give special attention to the needs of mature students, especially in terms of help with study skills and the like (see Part III).

Conclusions and recommendations

Nature of the initiative

- 4.66 The HEA does not seek to prescribe detailed modes of actions to grant recipients. Institutions are free to try out a variety of schemes (paragraph 4.4).
- 4.67 The sums specifically added by institutions to targeted initiative funding are not separately identified; they vary between institutions (paragraph 4.6).
- 4.68 Most institutional statements express some commitment to promoting mature student access, sometimes in general statements about widening access and provision for hitherto underrepresented groups (paragraph 4.9).
- 4.69 Almost all institutions were already working with mature students before the initiative was launched and accordingly it is, implicitly or explicitly, integrated with other activities (paragraph 4.10).
- 4.70 The sums granted through the initiative are relatively modest. They have been used to some effect in that they have:
- allowed the appointment of dedicated staff who act as access or mature student officers
 - caused some institutions to bring under review selection procedures for mature students
 - allowed some institutions to introduce particular courses adapted to the needs of mature students (paragraph 4.13).
- 4.71 The initiative is less successful in the following respects:
- in many institutions, it has not led to systematic planning, to include revisions of mission statements, operational plans, budget allocations and staff training to accommodate the needs of mature students
 - there is no institution-wide consideration of educational style and delivery appropriate to mature students (although many students do not seek different treatment)
 - in most institutions, the benefits experienced by full-time students exceed those derived by part-time students
 - some universities have not increased their offer of part-time and distance education as a way to securing the admission of more mature students
 - training is not generally in place to help academic staff address the teaching and learning issues raised by the presence of mature students
 - it is unclear whether there has been a substantial increase in the extent of out-reach work, in addition to that already on offer, that can be traced to the initiative (paragraph 4.14).

Planning and resources

- 4.72 The following points are relevant to institutional planning and the use of resources:
- the most important gaps in relevant action are in strategic planning for mature access, studentships or other financial support, consideration of the educational style and delivery, flexibility of provision, part-time and distance education (paragraph 4.15). **We recommend that higher education institutions give consideration to these issues (BPG 26)**
 - a minority of institutions provide resources for the initiative from their own funds. Mature students usually engender unspecified costs (paragraph 4.16)

- the unit funding system has a number of features that seem to be inhibiting the growth of part-time courses (paragraph 4.17)
- some institutions are likely to back continuation of activities under the initiative but not all institutions could be certain about continuation if central funding ceased (paragraphs 4.20 – 4.21). We note, however, that the HEA has recently established the possibility of continuity of initiative funding
- courses devised jointly by employers and institutes rather than attempts to recruit mature students to university courses may better meet the skills shortages (paragraph 4.23)
- institutional responsibility for the initiative and for policy on mature students is managed in various ways. The level of ultimate responsibility is towards the top of the hierarchy; it is connection between the university and the departments and other units that may still need strengthening (paragraph 4.24). **We recommend that higher education institutions give consideration to ways in which units and staff can be encouraged to take on board issues relating to mature students (BPG 28)**
- the novelty and added value of the initiative rest in the implication of national support and in the ability it confers among other things to make committed appointments of access officers, and mature student officers and to start preparatory courses (paragraphs 4.26 & 4.27)
- all of the institutions have long received mature students although they were rarely identified as a separate target group. There are many examples of courses suitable for mature students already being provided (paragraphs 4.28 & 4.29).

Connections and marketing

- many of the nine institutions have links with other education sectors; some, but not all, have arisen from targeted initiatives (paragraph 4.30)
- it is often difficult for people in settings remote from higher education to fully grasp the possibilities of securing access (paragraph 4.31)
- institutions' attempts to market the opportunities open to mature students are variable and often insufficient. However, some institutions made considerable efforts and employ a range of marketing procedures (paragraphs 4.32 – 4.34)
- a more vigorous nation-wide campaign through the media is thought necessary by many students. Television and other advertising encouraging applicants should refer to applicants other than school leavers. Local, institutional publicity is also needed. These efforts will be effective if only made as part of a more holistic effort including the setting of institutional and departmental targets and a clear plan of action with a publicity budget attached to it (paragraph 4.35). **We recommend that national agencies and higher education institutions give consideration to more effective publicity at national level (BPG 13)**

Preparatory courses and accreditation and transfer

- preparatory courses are a significant and appreciated feature of the targeted initiative in some, but not all, of the institutions (paragraph 4.36)
- some academic staff believe, however, that access work can be best undertaken in institutions below those of the third-level and that universities should work with further education institutions to that end (paragraph 4.42)
- different preparatory courses have different forms of accreditation and academic units have different approaches to selection (paragraph 4.43). Students completing such courses should be able to transfer to institutions offering the course sought after (paragraph 4.44) However, Ireland has not yet established a credit transfer system (paragraph 4.52), although there are plans

to do so under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999. **We recommend that a national course credit scheme be created and transfer between institutions established and that accreditation and access procedures be standardised (BPGs 11 & 12)**

- there are felt to be problems with the CAO application form on which some mature students apply. A special form for mature student applications is thought to be needed (paragraph 4.48). **We recommend that consideration should be given to this issue by CAO and higher education institutions (BPG 14)**

Support

- orientation and support given to mature students on entry to undergraduate life are critical to their ability to assimilate well to university work and to reconcile it with their other obligations (paragraph 4.53). **We recommend that higher education institutions give full support to units and staff concerned with educational, counselling and social support to students (BPG 30)**
- almost everywhere, child-care facilities are a problem (paragraphs 4.54 – 4.56). **We recommend that higher education institutions give consideration to better child-care facilities for mature students with children (BPG 31)**
- counselling and support systems do have a mediating role (paragraph 4.63)
- staffing practices do not reflect the needs of out-reach programmes such as the time needed for extra support required by students, and the additional travelling time for staff. Nor is remuneration for extra work adequate (paragraph 4.64). **We recommend that higher education institutions give consideration to providing academic staff with adequate recognition for time dedicated to courses in outlying areas (BPG 34).**

CHAPTER 5. STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF COURSES

- 5.1 Our study was necessarily concerned with the overall logic, structure and outcome of the targeted initiative but, although we could not get more than marginally into the issue, the nature of the educational experience emerged as salient. The issues are: the style of education on offer; allaying anxiety; the extent to which content is changing; the shift towards more continuous assessment; course provision; shifts in organisation: modular, and distance education courses.

The style of education on offer

- 5.2 Those involved in life long learning tend to assume that the curriculum or modes of instruction should be modified to allow for the particular needs and knowledge of mature students. This is an assumption only partly supported internationally by faculty in many subject areas who vary in their belief in the importance of taking students' working and life experience as the basis for third-level education (Kokosolakis and Kogan, 2001).
- 5.3 For the most part, mature students and faculty would not expect the main body of knowledge, concepts and techniques that constitute the 'higher education experience' to be altered for the sake of mature students: that would be condescending and not acceptable to universities which aim to provide teaching consistently based on scholarship. At the same time, universities are opening up to new forms and criteria of knowledge which more willingly admit experiential learning than do more traditional formulations. The University of Limerick (UL) which offers co-operative education, under which students spend nine months in supervised work placement, states in its Strategic Plan that 'the student population will be much more diverse ... and this will require greater flexibility in scheduling, assessment, pedagogy and a re-examination of existing procedures to ensure that an optimal learning environment is provided'. The Dean of Learning and Teaching is carrying through these policies and in our view all institutions will do well to review their educational styles and provisions in this way. Inasmuch as these changes occur they will affect all students. Contributions by the initiative towards other HEA objectives e.g., modularisation, innovative teaching methods, gender equality, are likely to come about indirectly, through the work of learning support and mediation by access and mature student officers, or through developments keyed in by teaching and learning units where they exist.

Allaying anxiety

- 5.4 It was noted that mature students showed no defects in memory skills, but rather anxiety that they cannot do as well as the young. Anxiety may serve as a driver at early stages, but if it persists it becomes dysfunctional. Part of the approach is to allay those concerns. They may need support in course, but did not want to be separated from the others.
- 5.5 Once mature students enter a department they are generally treated the same as other students. They may be assigned to a personal tutor. They may tend to sit together in class, but split up for certain modules. Mostly they are left to it, and no one may have special responsibility for mature students, although individual teachers might take an interest. Many of the problems need not arise where there is a strong departmental personal tutor system, although staffing ratios make academic staff hard pressed. Indeed, many respondents to our student survey expressed the desire for more access to tutors. They also expressed the desire for improved teacher skills in the classroom combined with better knowledge and understanding of the needs and responsibilities of mature students (see Part III).
- 5.6 At the beginning of the course, students may need reassurance about their capacity to succeed. 'The first semester may come as bit of a shock.' The problems met within faculties and departments were mainly psychological – 'can I do it?' and some fear of the obligation to produce written assignments and exams. Some senior members of faculty spend quite a deal of time in helping mature students to overcome their apprehensions about a return to a world in which essay writing to dead-lines and mastery of complex texts were the norm. Some spoke of the special relationship that might be developed with them: they were not afraid to ask questions, and some became personal friends. In some faculties, but not all, there is an open door arrangement for advice from staff. 'There is a first year meeting to make them aware that faculty are alive to their anxieties and second and third year wine and talk evenings held in an impressive historic part of the college'. This picture contrasts with that of another university where an active and committed access officer does a great deal for mature students but according to more than one member of faculty,

'the whole pastoral area is neglected'. There is difficulty in getting access to the four counsellors who are understaffed. Such facilities as exist are not always known about by students.

- 5.7 The need for mediation mentioned above suggests, however, that some teachers have a narrow perception of their tutorial and pastoral functions. In some institutions students are allocated a personal tutor. But their presence was not always made obvious to us in our discussions with ten groups of students. The particular issue of mature students raises the general and fundamental issue of the responsibility that does and should rest on departments to look after their students. We have instances where students paid strong tribute to the help given by staff. But we were also surprised to find how many students whom we met seemed grateful for quite small attentions given them, and spoke of the difficulty of securing individual attention. The tutorial function should figure strongly in any staff development schemes. We are, however, aware that staffing ratios are not generous, given the burdens on staff from, for example, quality assurance and the need to demonstrate research outcomes. Perhaps the reduction in the numbers of students will ameliorate this.
- 5.8 Even where tutorial, adult education and mature student officer concern for students is strong, some areas of central administration are thought to lack attention to the needs of mature students. The experience of seeking careers advice, too, from within one university was not good: one student was told she was too old to be thinking of a career. The system was said to be standardised so that mature students were constantly having to explain why the system had to be modified for them. The problems may be accentuated for part-time students. In the view of one administrator, however, it is possible to go overboard – 'university is not about spoon feeding. Many mature students are aggressive, with unrealistic expectations'. At the same time we encountered administrators strongly committed to mature student access and meeting their needs.

Assessment

- 5.9 There is a tendency towards a higher proportion of continuous assessment as part of a general trend; professional training in particular has met requirements of mature students through such an emphasis. 'Teachers question the validity of closed book three hour examinations for people in their fifties.' 'Evaluation is continuous here with a cumulative system so it is pressurised all the time rather than concentrating at the end which adds pressure and is a source of stress. We have seen excellent mature students break down in formal exam situations while younger students are drilled in it.' Continuous assessment together with modular systems are, however, noted as imposing a continuing burden on students and teachers which is not always appreciated in advance.

Course provision

- 5.10 If courses do not differentiate between mature students and school leavers, there is already a large variety that are particularly suited to mature students. They may not derive directly from the targeted initiative but are part of the general move forward in meeting the needs of non-traditionally recruited students. Some examples from different institutions are:
- out-reach part-time degrees in external centres in e.g., archaeology and history, psychology and sociology. The university is working on a modular, flexible curriculum and has two outlying Irish language centres
 - 'anybody working in companies etc can apply to be a link-in student in any of the modules'
 - a science access course is being developed to meet a decline in applications from mature and young students for science
 - consideration of part-time modular courses, possibly involving more distance learning features
 - a University Industry Programme for continuing professional education to foster links with industry. Provides a semi-distance education course with satellite broadcasts to ten centres across Ireland. Students are aged between 25 and 70 and the vast majority are in employment
 - two-year degree courses for students with diplomas aimed at people with work experience

- a part-time modular evening degree replicates a day degree
 - a Department of Mathematics providing walk-in clinics for remedial maths with a contact person for mature students
 - a library has surveyed mature students on e.g., loans, opening hours, and full-time/part-time priorities. Information skills courses help students to navigate, retrieve and evaluate information
 - diploma courses in an Out-reach Centre in community work, technology and education
 - post-experience programmes for mature learners in industry
 - adult learners who successfully complete diplomas can go on to mainstream degree programmes.
- 5.11 These examples, and many more could be found, demonstrate that flexible part-time and evening courses can attract many mature students.
- 5.12 Concern about the curriculum and its delivery is evident in some institutions but mainly about styles in general than the explicit concerns of mature students. At Trinity College, Dublin (TCD), there is concern about the need for more staffing resources, particularly part-time staff, and accommodation that will make smaller groups possible and training for graduate students and other part-time teachers.
- 5.13 A particular point made in one university was that students had certificates that they could not use, a complaint often made by those associated with women's groups. Partly in response to that, a university set up a part-time modular degree.
- 5.14 Curriculum and modes of learning are changing but not specifically for mature students. There is a modest trend to modularisation and proliferation of assessment. Whilst many faculty might remain traditional in outlook, younger staff are shifting on modes of delivery and curriculum. Some faculty believe that mature students benefit from more discussion-based programmes, seminars rather than lectures but ratios do not make this possible. 'Many blossom in seminars. Mature students can be articulate in tutorials but not translate that into written work e.g., they can write grammatical English but cannot tackle literary criticism and developing a written argument.' 'Mature students will need support so not to be overcome by the system. Academics are limited by time and ... I cannot have floods of practice run essays. It is difficult to provide smaller groups and working on material within them with staffing ratios of 20:1.'

Staff training and development

- 5.15 Staff development is not well installed in most universities in most countries, but there are aspects of work that might benefit from systematic training. One college intends to provide courses for those teaching mature students and with the help of the initiative, to support good academic practice by organising short courses on 'the adult learner'. At the University of Limerick (UL) the Dean of Teaching and Learning is active in promoting better practice through nine training interventions to make staff think about the teaching role and the challenges that face them, the ways of dealing with students, and ways of teaching non-conventional groups. At Dublin City University (DCU), the Dean of Teaching and Learning has control of a university-wide budget (about 1% of total income) to improve teaching and learning. These should all affect the treatment of mature students whose educational problems are in substantial degree those of all undergraduate students.

Student perceptions

- 5.16 Most mature students whom we met are glad to be experiencing third-level education and some expressed considerable satisfaction with their courses and general treatment. This was confirmed by the many additional comments provided by respondents in their completed questionnaires for the student survey (see Part III). Institutions vary but some present a formidable list of academic problems. Some may emanate from ungenerous staffing ratios but others from a parsimonious perception of the teaching and tutorial role. We noted earlier examples of the surprising need for mediation between students and staff.
- 5.17 The complaints, as heard from some of the groups of students whom we met, include:

- poor teaching and tutorial practice
- lack of connection between tutorials and texts used in lectures
- tutorials which do not compensate for lack of time for questions about the lectures
- feedback on style of essays given after essays have been marked by lecturer which is too late
- ‘a lot of lecturers in exams just want you to give back what they told you. If you had opinions that contradict you have to keep them to yourself’
- ‘there is an over emphasis on academic subjects, but, even more, formal lecturing e.g., a lecturer reading from a text book’
- ‘some of the lecturers have difficulty relating to mature students because they didn’t like being challenged’
- ‘there is a hard style of teaching’
- ‘mature students are reluctant to ask questions because it might indicate that they should not be here in the first place’
- some lecturers leave little room for engagement in discussion/debate
- students’ attendance is marked on a register in some courses
- in some areas (e.g., education) the workload is huge, as much as 26 contact hours a week. ‘I am here from 8 am until 6 pm and still cannot keep up’
- the system is too intensive and competitive: ‘exams results are posted up so everyone can see how everyone else has done. I would like less emphasis on grades’
- there are heavy examination requirements for first year courses but continuous examinations are also a source of stress
- classes are timetabled early and late and not accessible to students who must get away to deal with family matters.

5.18 Staffing ratios make it difficult to offer repeat sessions and accommodation may not be available for timetable flexibility. These issues do not appear to be taken into account in timetabling lectures and classes. Generally there is little connection between educational and pastoral issues. Once again, many of these issues discussed above, including flexibility of the course timetable and provision, are mirrored in the comments supplied by the respondents to the student survey.

Problems with pre-requisites

5.19 Some subject areas demand pre-requisite knowledge which most mature students are unlikely to have. It is virtually impossible take some courses without previous study of mathematics and science or modern languages and, indeed, it is necessary if students are to meet the demands of advanced study in certain areas. We have noted the work of some preparatory courses in helping mature students gain such knowledge.

5.20 Students aiming to qualify as primary school teachers are required to be qualified in the Irish language. This is a requirement that most students who raised the issue with us accept as appropriate, although we were told that the level of Irish required for entry which is established nationally is a barrier to admission and prevents graduates from other courses becoming teachers.

5.21 The Irish requirement was singled out in some of our interviews as a particular cause for concern and in particular courses in academic Irish language, that were thought to require an academicism not relevant to the preparation of primary school teachers

Arrangements for delivery of courses

5.22 Flexibility in the delivery of courses - through part-time, modular and distance education - will be necessary if Ireland is to recruit many more mature students, and responses to our student survey were supportive of such flexibility in delivery. We have already noted some examples of part-time and distance education provided for mature students. One university with few full-time mature students has a long tradition of evening degree courses, so that its library is open in the evening, Saturdays and most Sundays. The part-time evening degree is seen as the most appropriate provider for adult education. Staff teach on evening programmes out of goodwill. In another, courses are delivered via satellite to another city and overseas (Montana, USA). A town within the university ambit had been selected by Eircom to be a pilot ‘information age’ town. A particular, but probably atypical, example was of a distance learning

certificate/diploma course for care workers. Student support was provided through local study centres located throughout the Republic. The majority of students were mature females working in the care sector; the qualifications gained from the programme enhanced their chances of promotion.

Distance learning

5.23 Distance learning, including the use of IT, was not often introduced to us as a feature of provision. The major providers of distance education in Ireland are Oscail (National Distance Education Centre, NDEC) and the UK Open University. A number of institutions are exploring the possibilities of using new communication technologies to increase opportunities for students who find travel to the campus difficult. In one university, employers had made it clear that evening out-reach rather than campus based courses were preferred and that they also favoured, but to a lesser extent, distance learning courses which could be in line with providing the collegial experience if blocks of learning were taken on campus. Many mature students had to travel long distances daily from rural areas. A view is beginning to form that course designers do not have to make a sharp choice between distance and face-to-face education. Courses that combine the use of open learning materials that can be studied at home or in the work place with some face-to-face teaching could provide an effective form of education, while reducing considerably the inconvenience experienced by many mature students who have to travel long distances or arrange for child-care.

Part-time courses

5.24 A key issue, not fully taken on board in many institutions, is the need to expand places and provide adequately for part-time students:

‘This university will not experience an upsurge in numbers of mature students whilst only providing full-time courses. The right combination is study groups within work, weekend workshops and part-time release from work to come to a centre. This institution had set up a pilot scheme last year to test how would they be recruited, how admitted, what resources, how would the system work. But no system.’

5.25 Whilst many institutions are considering providing part-time courses, in one university, where between 13% to 16% of students were mature and it was felt necessary to think about more flexible forms of delivery that might include teaching in the evenings or on Saturdays, ‘staff, who still see life in terms of the traditional modes, would need some inducements to participate’. In noting some unwillingness to move forward, it should be again remarked that staffing burdens are heavy, with ungenerous staffing ratios and increased demands for more research outcomes. At the same time, it is clear that if the universities are to attract more mature students, they will have to plan and provide for many more part-timers than is evident in most institutional plans. The numbers of them are unclear, and there are no inducements to institutions or to students to advance the numbers. Reference to part-time students in our interviews was rare, although they were in the majority in our student survey (see Part III).

5.26 There was criticism of the absence of financial support for part-time education:

- ‘Grant aid for second chance students for part-time study would have a transforming effect on the numbers attracted to such courses and our ability to make the provision available.’
- It was seen as unfair that: ‘part-time students receive no fee remission or grant aid, but it is full-time education done by people in their spare time; people actually do more hours than those on the full-time degree’, and, conversely, in one university it is estimated that 50% of its full-time students are in employment for more hours than they actually study.
- ‘By abolishing fees for full-time study the government has contributed to the inequality in society rather than taken it away. In the HEA definition of a student, those who study for less than an academic year do not count at all; this has significant implications for students who wish to study on a flexible basis, such as those who would prefer to study for a single semester.’

Relations with younger students and benefits brought by mature students

- 5.27 Although 18 year olds may refer to them as 'back of the heads', 'because they always sit in front', and some younger students are said to feel overshadowed in tutorials by mature students, the general view is that 18/19 year-old students could benefit from the presence of mature students. Mixing with a range of age groups may reasonably be regarded as part of life experience that higher education should provide.
- 5.28 Generally, staff believe modes of transmission improved as a result of mature students' presence.
- 'Mature students transform the chemistry in class because they bring a whole range of life experiences.'
 - 'They are likely to ask the questions because they have the confidence and are less instrumentalist towards and have an intrinsic interest in learning and are not chalking up results. It is good to have people engaging in issues as ideas rather than just passing exams. I teach things such as parenting skills and it has a lived reality for them.'
 - 'There are advantages in having mature students given the constrained understanding of school leavers resulting from the pushing to get the points.'
 - 'They are more enthusiastic about learning. They bring rich life experience to literary analysis. They are the first to say thank you at end of a course. Even in big anonymous lectures always sitting in front row in my direct vision they nod approval and engage as lecture goes on which is comforting for me as I lecture.'
 - 'Mature students can be experts and keep you on your toes because they are so interested; that has positive effect on discussions in tutorials they always ask questions. It is an overall synergy. They generally do well. They start the ball rolling in seminars; act as co-teachers.'
- 5.29 Yet, accommodating them in larger numbers may produce problems: 'When they were only a small proportion of the population their distinctive needs could be accommodated within the normal system; the necessary extra attention could be provided at the margin of the lecturer's time ... with larger numbers, a separate approach would be necessary.'

Success rate of mature students

- 5.30 Many mature students enter through the normal routes available to all full-time students, and not all institutions have data showing success and drop-out rates. It will be highly desirable for future policy purposes that institutions do collect these data in a nationally consistent form, that they should run across the two third-level systems, and that they should distinguish between those with and those without school leaving certificates. Such data should enable institutions and the HEA to possess the following indicators:
- the retention rate of students on preparatory courses
 - the progression rate to third-level institutions
 - the retention rate of mature students in third-level courses
 - the success rate of mature students in third-level courses.
- 5.31 Although we have no systematic figures of success rates for mature students, we can give some examples:
- of the University College Cork's (UCC) mature student 1996 intake, 74% graduated, 70% with honours degrees. Retention rates for mature students were thought to be better than for the traditional student group and this was seen as a result of the mentoring programme
 - at National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), in 1998/99 of first year mature students, the dropout rate was 8%. This became 7% in 1999/00. There was no major difference between them and other students
 - at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MIC) on the BEd programme, no mature student dropped out in 2000/01 and on the BA programme only one of the ten of the drop-outs was a mature student; this was below the general rate.

5.32 As far as degree classifications are concerned, the figures available are again limited. A future phase of the initiative would benefit from data showing the classes achieved by mature students, broken down under those entering through the CAO scheme, with normal school leaving qualifications (late returners) and those entering through other qualifying schemes (second chance students). The figures available from individual institutions show that mature students as a whole do as well as the school leavers:

- in one institution, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, (MIC), for the 1998 cohort, 40% of mature students gained 2:1s as against 21% of CAO students. In the 1999 cohort, 25% of firsts and of 2:1s each were mature students. At the lower end, mature students were also more highly represented than the CAO route (but only three mature students were at the bottom). 80% passed in the first year and most others got through on further attempts. 73% received honours - about the same as the school leavers
- at National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) mature students generally get 2:2s
- at University College Dublin (UCD) if they survive the first two years they do well but the best are young students
- at Dublin City University (DCU) if they survive the first year, they usually complete
- at St. Patrick College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin (SPD) attrition rates for mature students are miniscule but are starting to increase as cohorts increase. There are good outcomes: Mature Graduates' Final Year Results for 1996-2000 showed 8% were awarded firsts, 39% 2:1s; 39% 2:2s and 14% passes.

Employment prospects

5.33 Whilst institutions keep records of the employment destinations of full-time graduates, most are not able to identify employment destinations by graduates' age (and indeed other important variables, such as socio-economic background). For the most part, faculty felt that they do well enough in their courses to take their place with other graduates in the labour market: 'Mature students do not have particular employment problems. Mature students often have different career paths, and do well, particularly if they had relevant experience before taking a degree.' 'Access as mature students makes a revolution in people's careers. They move up from lower to higher or other professional occupational grades.'

5.34 In one college, a comparison of employment of BA mature graduates 1996-1999 prior to entering the course with their employment after completion was encouraging:

- none was employed as a higher professional before, but 3.6% were so employed after graduation
- 6% had been employed as lower professionals; that figure rose to 24.1% after graduation
- 8.4% had become employers or managers – there was none before. 4.8% salaried employees had become 8.4%
- 14.4% had been manual workers; none now was.

Conclusions and recommendations

5.35 The nature of the educational experience emerges as salient. The issues are: the style of education on offer; the extent to which content was changing; the shift towards more continuous assessment; shifts in organisation: modular, and distance education courses (paragraphs 5.1, 5.9, 5.14).

5.36 Students and faculty do not expect the higher education experience to be altered for the sake of mature students. At the same time, universities are opening up to new approaches to education (paragraph 5.3).

5.37 Contributions by the initiative towards other HEA objectives are likely to come about indirectly through learning support or through developments keyed in by teaching and learning units where they exist (paragraph 5.3).

- 5.38 Mature students are generally treated the same as other students (paragraph 5.5). The general view is that 18/19 year-old students benefit from the presence of mature students (paragraph 5.28).
- 5.39 Most mature students express considerable satisfaction with their courses and general treatment. Some students, however, present a formidable list of academic problems (paragraphs 5.16, 5.17). **We recommend that institutions and their departments and academic staff examine admission criteria and procedures and arrangements for teaching and learning (BPGs 32 & 36 - 40).**
- 5.40 Students may need reassurance about their capacity to succeed. Support from academic staff varies and problems are minimised where there is a strong departmental personal tutor system (paragraphs 5.4 – 5.7).
- 5.41 Staffing ratios make academic staff hard pressed (paragraphs 5.5 – 5.7) and make it difficult to offer repeat sessions for students (paragraph 5.18). **We recommend that higher education institutions with support from the HEA give consideration to improving staffing ratios (perhaps made possible by reduced numbers of students) (BPG 35).**
- 5.42 Some areas of central administration are thought to lack attention to the needs of mature students. The problems may be accentuated for part-time students. At the same time we encountered administrators strongly committed to mature student access and meeting their needs (paragraph 5.8).
- 5.43 Aspects of work with mature students might benefit from staff development (paragraph 5.15) **We recommend that higher education institutions and relevant national bodies give consideration to the provision of staff training directed to the concerns of mature students and new ways of learning (BPGs 19 & 33).**
- 5.44 Some examples of courses suited to mature students are noted (paragraph 5.10). Some subjects demand pre-requisite knowledge which most mature students are unlikely to have **We recommend that higher education institutions and their departments and academic staff critically examine admissions criteria and curriculum (BPGs 36 & 37). We also recommend that consideration be given to the funding of a more comprehensive range of preparatory courses (BPGs 16 & 18).**
- 5.45 Flexibility in the delivery of courses will be necessary if Ireland is to recruit many more mature students. There are good examples of part-time and distance education provided for them, but the need to provide adequately for part-time students is not fully taken on board in many institutions. Reference to part-time students in our interviews was rare (paragraphs 5.25 - 5.26). **We recommend that institutions and their departments and faculty are encouraged to move towards more flexible curricula through modular systems and the development of mixed-mode courses involving a combination of open learning materials and face-to-face teaching (BPGs 20 & 41). We also recommend that the relationship between NDEC (Oscail) and higher education institutions is reviewed (BPG 21).**
- 5.46 For many mature students, part-time courses are preferred, or indeed the only means by which they can participate in higher education. There is some considerable discrepancy between the financial burdens faced by full and part-time students. In addition, the present funding methodology is such as to discourage the provision of courses that provide students with greater flexibility than that allowed by traditional full and part-time courses (paragraph 5.26). **We recommend that consideration be given to reducing the differences faced by full and part-time students in respect of fees policy and financial support and that the funding methodology be reviewed to allow the funding of courses that provide students with flexible study arrangements including courses whose duration are less than an academic year (BPGs 7 & 9).**
- 5.47 Examples of success rates for mature students are encouraging (paragraph 5.32). Institutions should routinely collect data showing success and drop-out rates in a nationally consistent form, across the two third-level systems, and they should distinguish between those with and those without school leaving certificates. Such data should enable institutions and the HEA to make use of relevant indicators (paragraph 5.30). **We recommend that higher education institutions (including all major providers of part-time courses, such as the Open University) in collaboration with HEA consider the collection of comprehensive data on a routine basis (BPGs 4 & 22).**

5.48 Whilst institutions keep records of the employment destinations of full-time graduates, most institutions are not able to identify employment destinations by graduates' age. For the most part, faculty felt that mature students do well enough in their courses to take their place with other graduates in the labour market (paragraph 5.33).

CHAPTER 6. SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL CONCERNS OF MATURE STUDENTS

Social concerns

- 6.1 The accounts of hardship and difficulty were detailed and sustained. For example, 'I am single but it is hard to make up shortfall in income so I have to work part-time which adds to the pressures of studying and I have to fit in a social life sometime as well'.
- 6.2 Distance and physical access are a problem not only in institutions serving diffusely populated areas but also in the larger towns and cities where public transport and poor road infrastructure make travel difficult.
- 6.3 There is evidence that women with children are far less likely than other possible entrants to take up higher education. A study undertaken in three Dublin colleges of mature students and family responsibilities (Cregan, 1998) showed that well over half of the full-time respondents had no children under 18 years of age, 50% of the respondents had no children at all and few of the male respondents had children. According to the 1996 census, 55% of households had children residing in them. This would suggest that full-time education is a more accessible option for mature students without family responsibilities which confirms the findings of the International Adult Literacy Survey (Hickey et al., 1998). Over 62% of the respondents in the sample of part-time students had no children at all, a higher figure than the full-time respondents, and only 19% of the female respondents had children, whereas 57% of the male respondents had children. All of the children of respondents in this sample were under 18. In this group, women with dependent children are hardly visible.

Financial concerns

- 6.4 Financial concerns weighed heavily on many students (although some were retired people well able to cope). Here are some of their views:

'I have to ask for money from my husband as I get no grant. My husband's income is taken into account but I am not his daughter! I do not exist in this state – I have no identity of my own just an appendage to my husband which I object too. A lot of women my age (middle-aged) would not think of going to college for that reason. My husband could say go and work in a shop. If you are home for years rearing a family it should count for something in terms of a grant.'

'It is a huge problem how you qualify for grants. They look at my income for last year and this does not pay your mortgage and feed your children so there is a conflict there. I am appealing for a mortgage subsidy that was turned down even though they are trying to get more males in primary teaching. The country is awash with money at the moment'. 'We have worked and paid taxes so should have help. To get the Back to Education Allowance you have to be unemployed for six months so there is a problem of how you qualify.'

'I am spending a lot of my small budget on teaching materials for teaching practice.'

'You need a grant for buying books and child-care costs.'

- 6.5 Mature students taking full-time courses may be entitled to a grant or a 'Back to Education Allowance (BTEA)'. Eligibility to a grant is calculated on the basis of the candidate's income; this includes the income of the student's spouse. If a mature student is deemed dependent on his/her parents, parental income is taken into account. The Points Commission (1999) on Fees and Grants noted the criticism levelled against the current level and availability of grants for full-time students and recommended that further consideration should be given to this issue (pp 99-100).
- 6.6 The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) is an educational opportunities scheme for unemployed people, lone parents and people with disabilities wishing to enrol on approved second or third-level courses. BTEA is paid for the duration of the course, including holidays, and successful applicants are allowed to work without any effect on their BTEA payment. In addition a Cost of Education Allowance is payable at the start of each academic year.

- 6.7 A number of students confirmed their reluctance to depend on their spouse's income. 'My children are grown up but my friends are non-existent. I think I have been out socially twice since September because science takes up a lot of time. I don't iron anymore! I miss my financial independence and hate having to ask my husband for a few bob. But we do get a grant from (the university) which is great.'
- 6.8 Others complained that, after a period of independence, they had to rely on the support of their parents which involved a reluctant return to the family home. Clearly, many students from all backgrounds had to overcome financial problems in order to become full-time students. While the provision for full-time students is not generous it is much better than that available to part-time students. There are said to be unfilled places on evening part-time degree courses because of fees. It is difficult to justify the present position whereby young students are given priority over deserving mature students whose only route may be part-time courses. The harsher fees regime faced by part-time students is, but only to a limited extent, mitigated by the fact that they can claim tax relief on fees, but the relief is available only at the standard rate of 22% (the top rate is 42%). The relief is, of course, of no benefit to those whose income does not render them liable to tax. These views are confirmed and expanded upon in Part III, which analyses the views of the students who responded to our questionnaire survey. Financial issues were a major concern to all the groups targeted in the survey, both full and part-time.

Conclusions and recommendations

- 6.9 Our evidence supports that of other studies, namely, that support for full-time mature students is inadequate and even less adequate for part-time students, the recruitment of whom is essential for the success of the nature access policy. More detailed conclusions are:
- accounts of mature student hardship and difficulty are detailed and sustained (paragraph 6.1)
 - distance and physical access are often a problem (paragraph 6.2)
 - women with children are far less likely than other possible entrants to take up higher education (paragraph 6.3).
- 6.10 Financial concerns weigh heavily on many students (although some are retired people well able to cope) (paragraph 6.4) including dependence on spouse's income (paragraph 6.5) and relying on the support of their parents (paragraph 6.8).
- 6.11 There are said to be unfilled places on evening part-time degree courses because of fees. The harsher fees regime faced by part-time students is, but only to a limited extent, mitigated by the fact that they can claim tax relief on fees, but the relief is available only at the standard rate of 22% (paragraph 6.8).
- 6.15 **We recommend that consideration be given to reducing the differences faced by full and part-time students in respect of fees policy and financial support (including child-care costs), and that tax relief should be better related to the position of mature students (BPGs 7 & 8). We also recommend that support be given for fees paid by distance education students on low incomes, including those on courses offered by accredited providers from outside the state (BPG 23).**

CHAPTER 7. EVALUATION BY INSTITUTIONS

- 7.1 The HEA in its recent publication *Promoting Equity in Higher Education* (Skilbeck and Connell, 2000) emphasised the need for a critical and ongoing evaluation of all initiatives at third-level in order that information about successful schemes can be disseminated and aspirations for equity realised. Universities are required to have quality assurance reviews, but, for the most part, institutions are not systematically evaluating their mature access initiatives, although some attempts can be noted. One college (MIC), for example, proposes with the help of the initiative to co-ordinate research on mature students to include a profile of mature entrants, exam results, attrition rates and the first destination of mature graduates. Specific evaluation has included evaluation of an induction day for mature students; some revision is envisaged for the coming year in line with student feedback. A funded Learner Support Unit has been evaluated by the Quality Review process for the whole college. A major student survey was directed to all students. There is informal evaluation with students at end of term providing feedback.
- 7.2 At Trinity College Dublin (TCD)'s preparatory course, evaluation is substantial. Its procedures include:
- (i) student evaluation: there are reviews at the end of each term and each course is reviewed individually by students using a confidential form
 - (ii) group evaluation with tutors. The co-ordinator facilitates that by getting students to look at various issues as a group and make recommendations for the following year e.g., relations with tutor
 - (iii) each strand of the course is overseen by course organiser who works in the College; the quality control staff work on an on-going basis and are met every month to recommend amendments.
- 7.3 The university intends to collect data on:
- recruitment*
- profile of applicants
 - approaches taken in selection
 - effectiveness of the established recruitment process
 - support required by departments to carry out effective recruitment
 - models of good practice for feeding back information to unsuccessful candidates
 - ways in which departments could attract mature students
 - recruitment practices employed in universities both nationally and internationally
- performance*
- factors which contribute to successful completion
 - shortfall in skills and knowledge
 - subject areas that require additional tuition
 - other needs that interfere with performance, e.g., child-care, finances, culture differences.
- 7.4 This is regarded as a formative self-evaluation. 'We would like to think of the programme as a research exercise and get people involved from the departments to look at our aims for the course and then evaluate for us to see if we have successfully achieved the aims, taking from the students' viewpoints as well as our own and see if they are being adequately prepared.'

Conclusion and recommendation

- 7.5 Systematic self-evaluation of mature student access and progress on the lines suggested above seems essential if support for further initiatives is intended. **We recommend that HEA should require institutions to systematically evaluate their initiative-related activities (BPG 25).**

Part III: The Student Survey

CHAPTER 8. INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND AND RESULTS

8.1 Sections 8.2 - 8.23 of this chapter provide an introduction and background to the student survey, along with a summary of the results. The remaining sections of the chapter, sections 8.24 - 8.156, comprise a more detailed analyses of those results by groups of students; it will enable those readers who wish to do so to peruse the detailed results of the comprehensive data-sets produced by the survey.

Introduction

8.2 In this part of the study, we were asked to:

- compare the profile of the target groups to the profile of the adult population that have not accessed higher education
- compare the success rates of full-time and part-time mature student applicants in obtaining places to those of younger applicants
- report on the views of the target groups
- make recommendations in relation to the provision of the additional 10,000 mature student places.

8.3 We were unable to compare the profile of the target groups to that of the adult population who have not accessed higher education as not all the relevant data were available to us. However, the table below compares the population of our target groups, by age group, with that of the Irish population as taken at the 1996 Census.

Table 8.1 Comparison of the population of the target groups by age group with that of the 1996 census population

	Target Groups	% population	Census Population (1996)	% population
23-24	(64)			
25-29	117	74	1,016,091	48
30-44	236			
45-54	89	19	412,047	19
55-59	16	3	153,807	7
60-64	8	2	137,946	7
65+	12	2	413,883	19
N/K	(14)			
Total*	478	100	2,133,773	100

(* Total and percentages exclude the target age group 23-24 and N/K)

8.4 We were asked to compare the success rates of mature and young students applying for places on full and part-time courses. In terms of full-time courses, we relied on the CAO to provide us with data. The data we received present only part of the picture as it does not capture those many mature students who enter universities through some sort of special/direct arrangements. Nevertheless, the data supplied by CAO show that in 2000/01 55% of mature applicants received an offer compared to 58% of all applicants. Of those mature applicants receiving an offer, 66% accepted it, the same percentage as the overall acceptance rate. This presents a more favourable picture than that offered by previous research (see paragraph 2.22). So far as part-time courses are concerned the majority of entrants are mature and the number of unsuccessful applicants is quite low. In general, institutions are not able to fill all their places and the only reason why an applicant would be rejected is the belief that they would not be able to benefit from the course.

8.5 The main focus of this part of the study concerned the profiles and views of the target groups and our recommendations regarding the 10,000 places are discussed in Chapter 9 of this report. The following sections contain a brief background to the survey that was undertaken, a summary of the results and a more detailed analysis of each of the target groups.

Background to the survey

8.6 Four groups were included in the survey

- mature applicants who were successful in gaining entry to third-level courses (both full and part-time)
- mature applicants who were unsuccessful in gaining entry to third-level courses (both full and part-time)
- mature students who were attending preparatory courses (i.e., foundation, access or return to learning courses) in third-level institutions
- mature students taking Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses.

8.7 The survey covered students in the institutes of technology as well as the universities and colleges. Random 1 in 5 samples of successful and unsuccessful mature student applicants to full-time undergraduate courses were obtained with the help of the CAO. In those universities that require mature students to apply direct to them for full-time study, we secured their help in gaining our sample. For our sample of mature applicants to part-time undergraduate study and preparatory courses, we relied on the help of the universities and the institutes of technology (although not all the institutes of technology provided part-time courses). The majority of samples we received from institutions was random 1 in 5, although in some cases questionnaires were given to mature students in lectures and seminars. We also sought the help of six Vocational Education Committees in securing our random sample of mature students on PLC and VTOS courses.

8.8 The questionnaires were intended to seek students' views about their reasons for coming to higher education as mature students, the barriers to participation, details about the course they applied for or the one on which they enrolled, their perception of the recruitment and selection processes, and, if granted admission, their views on their experience of higher education so far, the appropriateness of existing provision of places for mature students in Ireland, and on possible developments in the provision of places. We also sought information about the respondents themselves such as their gender, age, occupation, country of citizenship/birth, ethnicity, and any disabilities and carer responsibilities they might have. In addition to close-ended and multiple choice questions, we included a set of open-ended questions. Examples of the questionnaires are reproduced in Appendix 3 – those for successful and unsuccessful applicants to third-level courses. We were able to pilot them at group meetings with students at the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and University College, Galway.

8.9 Questionnaires were sent out on two occasions during the course of the study. The first dispatch resulted in a very low response rate. As a consequence those institutions with a particularly low rate were asked to send out the questionnaires once again. The following table shows, for each target group, the numbers of questionnaires dispatched and finally returned.

Table 8.2 Questionnaires dispatched and returned

<i>Description of target groups</i>	<i>Nos. sampled</i>	<i>Nos. returned</i>	<i>Response rates (%)</i>
CAO full-time applicants	286	125	44
HEIs full-time and part-time applicants	952	265	28
Preparatory courses students	68	38	56
CAO/HEIs unsuccessful applicants	468	73	16
PLC students	300	55	18
Totals	2074	556	27

8.10 As can be seen from the above table, low response rates were received from unsuccessful applicants and Post-Leaving Certificate students. For this reason only brief summaries of the main characteristics and views of these respondents are provided in the detailed analyses.

Summary of results

Overall profile of respondents

8.11 The majority of respondents were female. The percentages were:

- students on third-level courses, 63% (60% full-time and 67% part-time)
- unsuccessful applicants, 63%
- students on preparatory courses, 53%
- students on Post-Leaving Certificate and other courses, 82%.

8.12 Other characteristics and views of the respondents are summarised below. In terms of socio-economic status, we used the information supplied by respondents for 'father's current or most recent occupation'. Many respondents did not provide this information and therefore our data are limited and caution should be applied to any interpretation of the data presented. For some of our target groups a pattern did emerge, but not for others; these are reported on in our detailed analyses.

Students on third-level courses

8.13 The majority of respondents, 58%, were part-time students. Of the full-time students surveyed (156), the majority (51%) were in the institutes of technology (ITs); 33% were at university. Of the part-time students (215), 57% were in the ITs and 40% at university. Institute of technology students were younger than university students, the median ages being 30 and 31 for full-time students and 34 and 38 for part-time students, respectively.

8.14 There were significant differences between the subjects studied by full-time students in the universities and institutes of technology. In the former 38% of students were studying Arts and Humanities subjects while the corresponding figure for the institutes of technology was 23%. In the institutes 30% were studying IT and/or IT combined with other subjects. In terms of part-time study, 39% of students were studying Arts and Humanities followed by Health-related subjects (33%). In the ITs, most part-time mature students were studying Business and Commerce (32%) and IT and/or IT combined with other subjects (22%).

8.15 A high proportion of full-time students (86%) had completed Leaving Certificates, although it is not clear whether they had obtained the necessary points to have entered a third-level course in which they would have been interested when they left school. When asked why they did not enter third-level education on leaving school, the majority cited the need (or desire) to earn money. Of the part-time students surveyed, the same high proportion (86%) had completed Leaving Certificates and again the most important reason cited for not entering third-level education after leaving was school was the need/desire to earn money.

Reasons for returning to study

8.16 The main reasons for existing students were career-related. When asked for their most important reason, full time students cited a career change (26%), professional development (24%) and interest in academic

study (19%). When asked to state all the factors that lead to their return to higher education, 75% gave, as one of their reasons, professional development followed by the pursuit of their interest in academic study (62%). Not surprisingly, the most important reasons given by part-time mature students were also career-related. However, when asked to state all the reasons, interest in academic study came out second highest at 62% after professional development at 65%.

- 8.17 The responses of unsuccessful applicants (most of whom were applicants to full-time study) and those on preparatory courses were different. For these groups interest in the academic subject and personal development loomed much larger.

Barriers facing mature students

- 8.18 When asked to state all the barriers that they had to overcome in order to enter third-level education, the most commonly quoted reason given by existing students was lack of finance. This was given as one of the factors by 60% of full-time and 32% of part-time students. The latter figure is perhaps surprisingly low but when interpreting the figures it must be remembered that the respondents were those that had overcome the barriers. Thus it may well be that the majority of part-time students are people who are comparatively well off and are able to afford the fees and other costs of study.

Admissions processes

- 8.19 In general, both full and part-time students were content with the admissions process, in particular the level of information provided by the institution and the understanding of those interviewing applicants of the circumstances and needs of mature students. Some individual students were unhappy with certain aspects of the process and in particular a majority of the unsuccessful applicants were dissatisfied with the process in general and complained about the lack of feedback from the institution to which they had applied.

The needs of mature students and the extent to which they are being met

- 8.20 The vast majority of both full and part-time third-level students said that they thought mature students had special needs in such areas as help with study skills, flexibility in course timetables and recognition of prior knowledge and experience. When asked to indicate the extent to which they felt that this was provided on a scale of 5, to a considerable extent, to 1, not at all, the mean scores were, with only a few exceptions, between 2 and 3 which indicates that more can be done to improve the services provided to mature students.

Experience to date

- 8.21 While the answers to the open-ended questions indicated that many students were seriously unhappy with certain aspects of their experience, the results indicated that overall experience matched or exceeded expectations. However, 16% of full-time students said that their experience did not match their expectations (the corresponding figure for part-time students was 11%). Institute students were less satisfied than university students; in relation to full-time students, 20% of the former and 10% of the latter reported that their experience did not match expectations, and part-time students were 13% and 8%, respectively.

Open and distance learning

- 8.22 In the open-ended section of the questionnaire, students were asked whether or not the availability of open and distance learning would have made it easier for them to have started higher education. Of those who replied, full-time students were more or less evenly divided, while a majority of part-time students answered positively. While many students would not be interested in taking distance learning courses, either because they want the social contact of face-to-face study or because they do not believe that distance education can be as effective as classroom based learning, the availability of a distance learning option would, for many mature students, have facilitated their entry to higher education. A number of students reported that they were put off by the cost of distance learning.

Conclusions

8.23 When drawing conclusions about what the above summary (and the more detailed analysis to follow) can tell us, it is important to keep in mind the response rates to our questionnaire survey. However, we believe that the data collected, from those mature students on courses in third-level institutions, provide sufficient evidence to enable the following conclusions to be made:

- the high proportion of respondents who possess Leaving Certificates suggests that many mature students could be described as delayed entrants rather than those who had had to overcome a poor school experience
- the main reasons for mature students – both full and part-time – returning to education are career-related
- financial issues – the need and/or desire to earn money – were the significant reasons provided by respondents (both full and part-time) for not embarking on third-level study after completing their Leaving Certificates
- financial issues continue to play a major role as the main barrier identified by respondents to becoming a mature student
- the universities are not providing opportunities for mature students in those disciplines that are most closely related to the needs of the Irish economy. Moreover, those opportunities that are provided by third-level institutions need to be better promoted
- both full and part-time respondents felt that third-level institutions should give special attention to the needs of mature students. For full-time mature students more help is required with study skills; for part-time mature students, flexibility in the timetable is important
- more needs to be done by third-level institutions to close the gap, in relation to the needs of mature students, between expectations and delivery
- opportunities to study through open and distance learning are a more attractive option for those respondents who are currently studying part-time than for those studying full-time.

The detailed analyses of the student surveys

A. Profile of mature students who were successful in gaining entry to third-level study

8.24 Questionnaires were sent out to those students who had applied for full-time third-level study through the CAO system as ‘mature students’ and those who had applied directly through the institutions’ own admissions system (for both full and part-time study) during the academic year 2000/01. Two hundred and eighty-six questionnaires were sent to those who applied through CAO; 125 were returned giving a response rate of 44%. Nine hundred and fifty-two questionnaires were sent to those who applied directly for both full and part-time study through the institutions; 265 were returned giving a response rate of 28%. In all 390. questionnaires were returned and analysed. The analysis that follows looks first at responses made by full-time students and then part-time students. Fifteen respondents have been excluded from this analysis because they did not state their mode of study.

Full-time Students

Characteristics of the questionnaire respondents

Gender

8.25 The number of male respondents was 63 (40%) and female 93 (60%); a total of 156 respondents. It should be noted, however, that while there was a balance between the sexes in the ITs, there were substantially fewer men than women in the university sector as seen in Table 8.3.

Sector of study

8.26 The overwhelming majority of respondents were studying at the institutes of technology, as shown in Table 8.3.

TABLE 8.3	<i>University</i>		<i>Institute</i>		<i>College/Other*</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Men	15	29	41	52	6	24	62	40
Women	36	71	38	48	19	76	93	60
Total	51	100	79	100	25	100	155†	100

(* Refers to the two colleges and other institutions of higher education.)

(† One respondent did not state which institution they were attending.)

8.27 In terms of age breakdown and sector of study, the following picture emerges:

TABLE 8.4	<i>University</i>		<i>Institute</i>		<i>College/Other</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
23-24	7	14	11	14	-	-	18	12
25-29	15	30	26	34	5	20	46	30
30-44	24	48	27	35	11	44	62	41
45-54	3	6	12	16	8	32	23	15
55-59	1	2	-	-	1	4	2	1
60-64	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
65+	-	-	1	1	-	-	1	1
Total	50	100	77	100	25	100	152	100
Median age	31		30		39		32	

(Totals exclude those respondents who did not state their age or institution.)

Subject of study

8.28 Most respondents were studying Arts and Humanities as Table 8.5 shows.

TABLE 8.5	<i>Men</i>		<i>Women</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Arts & Humanities	17	27	37	37	54	33
Business & Commerce	6	9	10	10	16	10
Health-related	4	6	5	5	9	6
IT + other combined subjects	17	27	13	13	30	18
Science &/or Technology	10	16	11	11	21	13
Other/NS	10	16	23	23	33	20
Total	64*	100	99*	100	163*	100

(* Some respondents ticked more than one subject category.)

8.29 In terms of sector differences, the majority of respondents attending university were studying Arts and Humanities followed by Health-related subjects and Science and Technology, whereas those attending the institutes of technology tend to study a greater range of subjects as shown in Table 8.6.

TABLE 8.6	<i>University</i>		<i>Institute</i>		<i>College/Other</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Arts &	20	38	19	23	14	52

Humanities						
Business & Commerce	4	8	10	12	2	7
Health-related	7	13	2	2	-	-
IT + other combined subjects	1	2	25	30	4	15
Science &/or Technology	7	13	14	17	-	-
Other	13	25	13	16	7	26
Total	52*	100	83*	100	27*	100

(* Some respondents ticked more than one subject category.)

Other characteristics

8.30 Ninety-three percent of respondents cited their country of citizenship as Ireland. Eighty-one percent were born in Ireland; 17% were born elsewhere and two respondents did not state where they were born. Ethnicity was given as 93% White Irish and 4% White European. Twelve (6%) respondents stated that they were registered disabled. Sixty-six percent of respondents stated that they had no carer responsibilities. Thirty percent (47) stated that they did; of these, the majority were women (38). For the purpose of this analysis, socio-economic status was taken as 'father's current or most recent occupation'. Of the 156 respondents, 28% (43) chose not to answer the question. Of those that did, 17% (27) cited skilled manual, 10% (15) higher professionals, 8% (13) farmers, and 8% (13) employers and managers.

Questions asked

8.31 (NB: not all the questions asked in the questionnaire have been analysed. This is because many respondents did not complete the full list of questions. In some cases therefore the highest response was 'no response').

Reasons for returning to education

8.32 Respondents were invited to indicate *all* the relevant reasons for wanting to return to higher education. In many cases therefore respondents chose more than one reason. The most important reasons given were:

- for professional development (75%)
- to pursue an interest in academic study (62%)
- to enable a change in career (44%)
- to help gain employment (44%).
- to reduce the chance of being unemployed (36%)
- to advance my present career (27%)

8.33 A greater proportion of women (83%) cited 'professional development' than men (63%). More women (48%) than men (37%), cited 'to gain employment' whereas more men (44%) than women (30%) cited 'to reduce the chances of being unemployed'. There were no significant differences from this pattern in terms of sector of study. When asked to identify the *most* important reason, 'to enable a change in career' came top (26%), followed by 'professional development' (24%) and 'to pursue an interest in academic study' (19%). There were no significant differences in terms of sector of study, although there were differences in the reasons given by men and women. Women cited 'for professional development' (26%) as most important – second most important for men at 22%, whereas men cited 'to enable a change in career' (32%) – second most important for women at 22%.

8.34 The questionnaire included a number of open-ended questions, one of which asked whether or not there were changes in the respondent's life that gave them the opportunity to become a mature student. Of those that chose to answer this question, a number mentioned changes in personal circumstances; for example they had identified a personal need for study (9), and/or other personal or family circumstances that had allowed or led them to consider third-level study (25). A large proportion (28) specifically mentioned that their children were now self-sufficient (i.e., they were of school age or they had left

home). A few had seen an increase in their own or their spouse's/partner's financial income (6); others had experienced a change in workplace circumstances, such as retirement, giving up work, wanting to be better qualified (11), and some mentioned the availability of courses in their local area (3).

Completion of Leaving Certificate

8.35 Eighty-six percent of respondents said they had completed their Leaving Certificate (13% had not). Marginally more men than women had done so (87% compared to 85%). Of those who did not complete their Leaving Certificate, the most important reason given was 'wanted/had to earn money' (25% - 5 respondents), although a relatively high proportion of respondents (45% - 9 respondents) chose not to answer this question.

Reasons why students did not enter higher education after school

8.36 For most students there were a number of factors that affected their decision not to enter third-level education immediately or soon after leaving school. Respondents were asked to state all the factors that applied in that decision, as well as the most salient reason. A high proportion of the respondents failed to answer the latter question but did answer the question asking for all reasons and the analysis that follows is based on that set of replies (although even in this case 29% did not answer the question).

8.37 The most commonly reported barrier was the need or desire to earn money; 38% of respondents gave this as one of the reasons. Otherwise it appears that there was a fairly broad range of reasons without any one being dominant. Some 40% had started or had thought about starting a course but either could not find, or could not obtain a place on, a course of their choice, or had started a course and had then either failed or had withdrawn. One reason why students did not enter third-level education immediately was that they had started a course of training outside the third-level system or had taken a job that seemed to offer better prospects; 29% of students appeared to fall within this category. Two of the suggested answers given were that the students had been bored with academic life or had seen more exciting possibilities outside education. Thirty-five percent answered 'yes' to one or both of these. Finally, about 33% cited a personal reason such as the desire to leave home and travel, or the need to look after others. The differences in responses between the different groups of students were not significant.

Preparatory courses taken

8.38 On deciding to return to education, respondents were asked whether or not a preparatory course had been taken prior to seeking entry to third-level study; 41% answered 'yes' and 54% 'no'. A greater proportion of men (44%) than women (39%) had taken such courses. When asked to identify the courses taken in preparation, 'VTOS course' came out top (34%).

Barriers facing mature students

8.39 When asked to identify *all* the significant barriers respondents had had to overcome in becoming a mature student, the following picture has emerged.

TABLE 8.7	All (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)
Lack of finance	60	56	62
Lack of confidence	42	30	49
Lack of knowledge of available opportunities	28	24	30
Need to care for children	25	13	33
Travel	24	19	27
Inadequate academic preparation	23	24	23

8.40 'Lack of finance' also emerged as the *most* important barrier when looking at responses by sector of study. Of those respondents attending university, 45% (23) of respondents cited this barrier as opposed to 48% (38) of those attending the institutes of technology. 'Lack of finance' continued to be the most important barrier in terms of respondents' age. It was cited by the biggest proportion of respondents in all the age ranges.

8.41 The questionnaire included an open-ended question which asked respondents whether they could suggest policies that might be adopted by the government or institutions that might help increase the number of people who apply to become mature students. Those who replied made a number of suggestions. By far the most mentioned suggestion (95) was the need for more financial aid (including assistance with travel costs, better tax allowance and an increase in the grant) as the following quotes exemplify.

'While there is finance available in the form of the Back To Education Allowance, if you've been unemployed for six months, and a grant if you are able to qualify for it – it is very hard to survive on these small amounts of money. If there was a rent allowance or travel expenses available, it would make life much easier. The grant rate might have been OK five years ago but the cost of living has gone up since then.'

'If I had realised the financial difficulty I was going to face, I may have put off going back to college for another few years. But I am in general glad I returned to college.'

'Student grants in Ireland need a massive increase. Mature students are better off on unemployment benefit than on a student grant, which doesn't make sense. Student grants and unemployment benefit need to switch places with each other.'

8.42 Better child-care in terms of the cost and the availability of facilities was also mentioned specifically by 34 mature students. Twenty respondents felt that there should be more courses and/or places available to mature students.

'If ITs and universities had full-time day courses for mature students more mature people would attend these courses. They are only available at night (evening) at the moment. Most people tell you they would consider going to college but could not face in with young students 18-20 year olds.'

Reasons for choice of course

8.43 In terms of the choice of respondents' present course, the following reasons were given:

	<i>All (%)</i>	<i>Men (%)</i>	<i>Women (%)</i>
Career reasons	9	11	8
Interest in the subject	31	35	29
Career/interest	59	52	63

8.44 A greater proportion of men than women cited 'interest in the subject matter', whereas more women indicated that 'career reasons' and 'interest in the subject matter' were of equal importance. Again, slightly different patterns emerge when sector of study (Table 8.9) is taken into account.

	<i>University (%)</i>	<i>Institute (%)</i>
Career reasons	10	10
Interest in the subject	25	30
Career/interest	61	59

8.45 Eighty-one percent of respondents stated that their present course was the one that they would most like to have done; 17% said it was not. More women (84%) than men (76%) were doing the course they most wanted to do. There was no significant difference between respondents' replies in terms of sector of study. The reasons given for not doing the preferred course of their choice was 'applied but not accepted' (48% of 27 respondents). This was the most stated reason given by men (10). The main reason cited by women was 'impossible or inconvenient travel arrangements (four), although many did not answer the question.

Learning about the course

8.46 'Direct contact with the institution' was the most cited reason by respondents (43%) when answering the question about how they first learnt about their course. The other most cited reasons were 'friend or family member' (13%), and 'careers adviser' (12%). When asked in the open-ended section of the

questionnaire whether there were policies that might be adopted by the government or institutions to help increase the number of people applying to become mature students, better promotion of information about educational opportunities was mentioned by respondents. This suggestion was made by 27 respondents.

Information provided by the institution

8.47 Respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 5 is extremely good and 1 extremely poor), the information they received from the institution upon application in terms of its usefulness, clarity and comprehensiveness. The following picture emerges when using the mean score by sector of study.

TABLE 8.10	<i>University</i>	<i>Institute</i>
Usefulness	4.17	3.65
Clarity	3.86	3.47
Comprehensiveness	3.88	3.41

The selection process

8.48 Asked whether they were interviewed or not as part of the selection process, the vast majority of respondents replied in the affirmative (62%). However, when analysed in terms of (sector of study (Table 8.11), the picture is different for the university sector.

TABLE 8.11	<i>University (%)</i>	<i>Institute (%)</i>
Interviewed	55	62
Not interviewed	45	34

8.49 When asked whether

- a) the interviewer understood the issues facing mature students
- b) the interviewer gave sufficient consideration to the knowledge/experience gained since leaving school
- c) the interview was appropriate to the application

respondents answered in the following way on a scale of 5 (to a considerable extent) to 1 (not at all) using the mean score.

	<i>Mean score</i>
a	3.78
b	4.16
c	4.12

The admissions process

8.50 Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 5 (wholly agree) to 1 (totally disagree) the extent to which they agreed with certain statements about the admissions process. Respondents' answers are analysed below (Table 8.12) using the mean score.

	<i>Mean score</i>
The process was efficient	4.03
It was unduly time-consuming	2.50
It took the circumstances of mature students into account	3.38
It was unduly complex	2.40
It helped me to judge whether I had the capacity for undergraduate study.	2.85

8.51 The open-ended section of the questionnaire invited respondents to suggest ways in which the admissions process might be improved. Most respondents left this question unanswered. Those who did answer and were not so happy with the process (19) indicated that it needed to be less bureaucratic and more efficient (i.e., cut down on the amount of time it takes between interview and knowledge of success; one respondent indicated that she was only informed two months before the course started, which gave her little time to sort out arrangements with her family circumstances), and a few questioned the relevance of aptitude tests for mature students. Others (10) felt that more information about choice of courses, timetable and so on should have been provided prior to admission. Around 23 respondents took the time to indicate that they were happy with the process.

Needs of mature students

8.52 Respondents were asked whether or not they felt that special attention should be given to the needs of mature students. The vast majority answered positively (79%) while 12% answered 'no' and another 8% did not answer the question. The main difference in terms of the characteristics of respondents lies in their age as shown in Table 8.13.

	<i>23-24 (%)</i>	<i>25-29 (%)</i>	<i>30-44 (%)</i>	<i>45-54 (%)*</i>
Yes	61	83	85	79
No	22	11	10	13

(* Data on the other age groups are not presented as the numbers are small.)

8.53 There were also differences in terms of sector of study; 90% of university students answered 'yes' compared to 76% of IT students. When invited to identify those areas where they thought special attention should be given, the following preferences were expressed by respondents:

- 81% Help with study skills
- 59% Flexibility in the course timetable (attendance)
- 58% Additional access to tutors
- 55% Recognition of prior knowledge/experience
- 53% Additional general counselling
- 51% Child-care facilities
- 42% Use of prior knowledge/experience
- 40% Teaching skills
- 40% Library opening hours

8.54 The list also varies somewhat in respect of sector of study as follows. Beside each is included the mean score derived from respondents' rating on a scale of 5 (to a considerable extent) to 1 (not at all) of the extent to which these 'needs' are found in their institution.

	<i>University % (ranking)</i>	<i>Mean score</i>	<i>Institute % (ranking)</i>	<i>Mean score</i>
Flexibility in the course timetable (attendance)	48 (5)	2.62	62 (3)	1.96

Help with study skills	83 (1)	3.13	77 (1)	2.77
Recognition of prior knowledge/experience	54 (3)	2.76	57 (4)	2.47
Additional access to tutors	54 (3)	2.82	63 (2)	2.67
Teaching skills	48 (5)	2.84	32 (9)	2.64
Library opening hours	39 (6)	3.83	40 (7)	3.20
Use of prior knowledge/experience	50 (4)	2.44	37 (8)	2.36
Child-care facilities	54 (3)	2.72	50 (5)	2.17
Additional general counselling	63 (2)	3.22	43 (6)	3.07

8.55 Much of the analysis above is echoed in the statements made by respondents in the open-ended section of the questionnaire which asked for suggestions of any steps that could be taken to improve the educational experience of mature students. An analysis of these statements is set out in Table 8.15 below (the numbers represent the frequency of statements made by respondents).

	<i>N</i>
Help with study skills	16
More/improved preparatory courses	9
More/improved institutional support (including the need for a dedicated liaison person)	20
Recognition of previous study and experience	6
Improved information about courses	10
More tutorials/access to tutors	19
More IT facilities/access/support	9
Better library facilities/access/support	9
Improved teacher skills/knowledge and understanding of mature students' needs	25
More flexible assessments	6
More flexible timetabling/provision	30

8.56 Some examples of the above categories can be contextualised in the following quotes.

More/improved institutional support:

'I feel that some of the 'support' is actually just lip service, an exercise in political correctness rather than real concern.'

Many people find universities elitist and intimidating – efforts will have to be made to overcome this:

'Overall the system is geared to 18 year olds who will go in, learn the material off by heart and repeat it back for exams/essays. There need to be changes made in the delivery of the whole educational package to accommodate different learning styles, prior knowledge and life experiences.'

Better library facilities/access:

'Library facilities are very poor. Shelves are not well stocked and opening hours that I can avail of are very limited.'

More flexible timetabling/provision:

'For mature students I think lectures at nine o'clock in the morning and after four in the afternoon are not appropriate, because if one has children they should fit in with school hours.'

'Greater flexibility of the timetable considering I sometimes travel for one lecture only (in a day). I travel 140 miles daily five days a week.'

Improved teacher skills/knowledge and understanding of mature students' needs:

'My experience has been a good one, but the college could be more sympathetic to the responsibilities that a mature student already has – more leeway with hours timetables etc. More understanding needed.'

'A more open approach from lecturers is needed – mature students tend to be ignored, lecturers talk "over their heads" as if they don't really count.'

Attitude of younger students and staff

8.57 Respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 5 (very much agree) to 1 (very much disagree), the extent to which they agreed with the following statements. The mean score is shown alongside each statement.

TABLE 8.16	<i>Mean score</i>
Younger students have generally been very welcoming and helpful to mature students	3.68
I feel put off by the attitude of younger students towards mature students	1.87
Lecturers have generally been very welcoming and helpful to mature students	4.18
I feel put off by the attitude of lecturers towards mature students	1.61
Other staff have generally been very welcoming and helpful to mature students	3.97
I feel put off by the attitude of other staff	1.77

Expectations and experience to date

8.58 Respondents were asked to indicate how their experiences to date met their expectations: whether they had broadly been met, whether they had been exceeded, or whether they had not been met. The majority (63%) stated that their experiences to date broadly met with their expectations. More men (67%) felt this way than women (60%). The main differences lie in the sector of study of the respondents as shown below.

TABLE 8.17	<i>University (%)</i>	<i>Institute (%)</i>
My experience broadly meets my expectations	69	58
My experience to date exceeds my expectations	18	19
My experience to date does not meet my expectations	10	20

Open and distance learning

8.59 In the open-ended section provided in the questionnaire survey, respondents were invited to give their views on open and distance learning. They were asked whether or not the wider availability of open and distance learning would have made it easier to start higher education. The following analysis of the statements has been made (the numbers represent the frequency of replies).

TABLE 8.18	<i>N</i>
Yes	50
No	54
Maybe	8
No answer given	44

8.60 Many respondents dismissed the idea of open and distance learning because they felt they lacked the discipline to study alone or wanted the ambience of the institutional environment as these quotes demonstrate:

'Full-time education is far easier and more rewarding than distance education, the latter being quite difficult to study on one's own.'

8.61 Other respondents dismissed open and distance learning because of the expense involved. Those who responded positively did so for reasons which the following quotes exemplify.

‘I started my education through the OU and this is an excellent vehicle for introducing mature students to third-level.’

‘It would make college and home life a lot less stressful if I could do more college work, i.e., access lectures through the internet.’

Other general comments

8.62 Respondents were invited in the open-ended section of the questionnaire survey to add any other general comments. Many did, and a great variety of responses were provided as the following quotations demonstrate.

‘I absolutely love being at college even though I find some subjects difficult. I’m just sorry I didn’t do it years ago and I wish I was 20 again.’

‘Government and institutions need to realise what a positive educational experience a mature student can have on society and the trickle down effect of such a valuable investment in the future. Education is never wasted.’

Part-time Students

Characteristics of the questionnaire respondents

Gender

8.63 The number of respondents male respondents was 72 (33%) and female 147 (67%); a total of 219 respondents.

Sector of study

8.64 The overwhelming majority of respondents were studying at the institutes of technology, as shown in Table 8.19.

TABLE 8.19

	<i>University</i>		<i>Institute</i>		<i>College/Other*</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Men	27	32	43	35	1	14	71	33
Women	58	68	80	65	6	86	144	67
Total	85	100	123	100	7	100	215†	100

(* Refers to the two colleges and other institutions of higher education.)

(† Four respondents did not state what institution they were attending.)

8.65 In terms of age breakdown and sector of study, the following picture emerges:

TABLE 8.20

	<i>University</i>		<i>Institute</i>		<i>College/Other</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
23-24	4	5	20	17	1	14	25	12
25-29	12	14	19	17	3	43	34	16
30-44	42	49	58	50	2	29	102	49
45-54	6	19	13	11	1	14	30	14
55-59	4	5	5	4	-	-	9	4
60-64	4	5	-	-	-	-	4	2
65+	3	4	1	1	-	-	4	2
Total	85	100	116	100	7	100	208*	100
Median age	38		34		28		36	

(*Totals excludes those respondents that did not state either their age or institution.)

Subject of study

8.66 Most respondents were studying Business and Commerce as Table 8.21 shows.

TABLE 8.21

	<i>Men</i>		<i>Women</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Arts & Humanities	13	18	32	20	45	19
Business & Commerce	19	26	41	25	60	26
Health-related	4	6	42	26	46	20
IT + other combined subjects	20	28	18	11	38	16
Science &/or Technology	9	13	7	4	16	7
Other/NS	7	10	21	13	23	10
Total	72*	100	161*	100	233*	100

(* Some respondents ticked more than one subject category.)

(NS = not stated)

- 8.67 In terms of sector differences, the majority of respondents attending university were studying Arts and Humanities followed by Health-related subjects, whereas those attending the institutes of technology tend to study a greater range of subjects, although the majority were studying Business and Commerce, as shown in Table 8.22.

TABLE 8.22

	<i>University</i>		<i>Institute</i>	
	N	%	N	%
Arts & Humanities	34	39	10	7
Business & Commerce	9	10	43	32
Health-related	29	33	17	13
IT + other combined subjects	8	9	29	22
Science &/or Technology	1	1	15	11
Other/NS	6	7	20	15
Total	87	100	134	100

(Only seven students were studying in the college other sector and of these six were studying Business and Commerce.)

Other characteristics

- 8.68 Ninety-seven percent of respondents cited their country of citizenship as Ireland. Eighty-five percent were born in Ireland; 14% were born elsewhere and two respondents did not state where they were born. Ethnicity was given as 96% White Irish and 3% White European. Nine (4%) respondents stated that they were registered disabled. Sixty-eight percent of respondents stated that they had no carer responsibilities. Twenty-six percent (56) stated that they did; of these, the majority were women (39). For the purpose of this analysis, socio-economic background was taken as 'father's most recent occupation'. Of the 219 respondents, 39% (86) chose not to answer the question. Of those that did, 10% cited farmers and another 10% skilled manual workers.

Questions asked

8.69 (NB: not all the questions asked in the questionnaire have been analysed. This is because many respondents did not complete the full list of questions. In some cases therefore the highest response was 'no response').

Reasons for returning to education

8.70 Respondents were invited to indicate *all* the relevant reasons for wanting to return to higher education. In many cases therefore respondents chose more than one reason. The most important reasons given were:

- for professional development (65%)
- to pursue an interest in academic study (62%)
- to advance my present career (57%)
- to enable a change in career (44%)
- to reduce the chance of being unemployed (21%)
- to help gain employment (11%).

8.71 An equal proportion of men and women (64% and 65% respectively) cited 'professional development'. There were no significant differences from this pattern in terms of sector of study.

8.72 When asked to identify the *most* important reason, 'professional development' again came top (37%), followed by 'to advance my present career' (32%) and 'to enable a change in career' (21%). There were no significant differences between the reasons given by men and women, although there were differences in terms of sector of study. Respondents attending both university and the institutes of technology cited as their first and second reasons 'professional development' (45% and 30% respectively) and 'to advance my present career' (32% and 31% respectively). As a third reason, however, university respondents cited 'to pursue an interest in academic study' (21%) whereas IT respondents cited 'to enable a change in career' (28%).

8.73 The questionnaire included a number of open-ended questions, one of which asked whether or not there were changes in the respondent's life that gave them the opportunity to become a mature student. Of those that chose to answer this question, a number mentioned changes in personal circumstances; for example they had identified a personal need for study (17), and/or other personal or family circumstances that had allowed or led them to consider third-level study (19). A large proportion (41) specifically mentioned that their children were now self-sufficient (i.e., they were of school age or they had left home). A few had seen an increase in their own or their spouse's/partner's financial income (9), others had experienced a change in workplace circumstances, such as retirement, giving up work, wanting to be better qualified (30), and some mentioned the availability of courses in their local area (11).

Completion of Leaving Certificate

8.74 Eighty-six percent of respondents said they had completed their Leaving Certificate (13% had not). More women than men had done so (90% compared to 78%). Of those who did not complete their Leaving Certificate, the most important reason given was 'wanted/had to earn money' (32%), closely followed by 'bored with school work' (29%), although a high proportion of respondents (36%) chose not to answer this question.

Reasons why students did not enter higher education after school

8.75 For most students there were a number of factors that affected their decision not to enter third-level education immediately or soon after leaving school. Respondents were asked to state all the factors that applied in that decision, as well as the most salient reason. A high proportion of the respondents failed to answer the latter question but did answer the question asking for all reasons and the analysis that follows is based on that set of replies (although even in this case 37% did not provide a reason).

8.76 The most commonly reported barrier was the need or desire to earn money; 35% of respondents gave this as one of the reasons. Otherwise, as for full-time respondents, it appears that there was a fairly broad range of reasons without any one being dominant. Some 27% had started or had thought about starting a course but either could not find, or could not obtain a place on, a course of their choice or had started a course and had then either failed or had withdrawn. One reason why students did not enter third-level education immediately was that they had started a course of training outside the third-level system or had

taken a job that seemed to offer better prospects; 31% of students appeared to fall within this category. Two of the suggested answers given were that the students had been bored with academic life or had seen more exciting possibilities outside education. Twenty-six percent answered 'yes' to one or both of these. About 13% cited a personal reason such as the desire to leave home and travel or the need to look after others. The differences in responses between the different groups of students were not significant.

Preparatory courses taken

- 8.77 On deciding to return to education, respondents were asked whether or not a preparatory course had been taken prior to seeking entry to third-level study; 24% answered 'yes' and 68% 'no'. A much greater proportion of women (29%) than men (13%) had taken such courses. When asked to identify the courses taken in preparation, 'access course at present institution' came out top (44%).

Barriers facing mature students

- 8.78 When asked to identify *all* the significant barriers respondents had had to overcome in becoming a mature student, the following picture has emerged.

TABLE 8.23

	<i>All (%)</i>	<i>Men (%)</i>	<i>Women (%)</i>
Lack of finance	32	25	35
Lack of confidence	31	26	33
Lack of knowledge of available opportunities	30	25	33
Need to care for children	23	21	24
Travel	22	18	24
Inadequate academic preparation	22	24	22

- 8.79 The picture changes somewhat when other factors are taken into account, especially sector of study and age. The most important barrier for those respondents attending university was 'lack of confidence' (39%) and for those attending the institutes of technology 'lack of knowledge of available opportunities' (34%). For both sets of respondents, 'lack of finance' was the second most important barrier (36% and 29%, respectively). 'Lack of finance' continued to be the most important barrier in terms of respondents' age. It was cited by the biggest proportion of respondents in the age ranges 23-24 (40%) and 25-29 (46%). Those respondents aged 30-44 cited 'lack of finance' and 'lack of confidence' in equal proportion (36%).
- 8.80 The questionnaire included an open-ended question which asked respondents whether they could suggest policies that might be adopted by the government or institutions that might help increase the number of people who apply to become mature students. Those who replied made a number of suggestions. By far the most mentioned suggestion by part-time mature students (187) was the need for more financial aid as the following quotes exemplify.

'I had intended to return to college full-time but when I looked into this I knew there was no possibility of me being able to support myself. To the best of my knowledge I would have received a grant of £30 per week because I was giving up a full-time job. I had paid tax in full-time employment for 10 years. If I had not worked I would be entitled to claim unemployment assistance of about £70 per week – this I thought was very unfair'

'Evening students must have a strong commitment in terms of time given to the course while working full-time/part-time/family or other commitments. This is not recognised and on top of the commitment described above; they are also charged high fees. A greater level of funding would give recognition to the sacrifices made and possibly attract more students.'

- 8.81 Of these 187, 52 specifically mentioned increasing the student grant and/or providing tax allowances; 15 wanted the part-time fees abolished and 37 felt that there should be paid study leave. Better child-care costs and availability of facilities were mentioned by 18 respondents. The availability of more courses and/or places for mature students was mentioned by 13 respondents.

Reasons for choice of course

8.82 In terms of the choice of respondents' present course, the following reasons were given:

	<i>All (%)</i>	<i>Men (%)</i>	<i>Women (%)</i>
Career reasons	25	31	22
Interest in the subject	30	43	23
Career/interest	47	32	55

8.83 A greater proportion than men cited 'interest in the subject matter', whereas women indicated that 'career reasons' and 'interest in the subject matter' were of equal importance. Again, slightly different patterns emerge when sector of study (Table 8.25) is taken into account.

	<i>University (%)</i>	<i>Institute (%)</i>
Career reasons	21	25
Interest in the subject	36	24
Career/interest	42	50

8.84 Eighty-two percent of respondents stated that their present course was the one that they would most like to have done; 15% said it was not. Slightly more women (83%) than men (81%) were doing the course they most wanted to do. In terms of sector of study, more university respondents were doing the course of their choice (87%) than those in the ITs (78%).

Learning about the course

8.85 'Direct contact with the institution' was the most cited reason by respondents (30%) when answering the question about how they first learnt about their course. The other most cited reasons were press advertisement (28%), friend or family member (13%), and employer (13%). When asked in the open-ended section of the questionnaire whether there were policies that might be adopted by the government or institutions to help increase the number of people applying to become mature students, 'better promotion of information about educational opportunities' was mentioned by 40 respondents.

Information provided by the institution

8.86 Respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 5 is extremely good and 1 extremely poor), the information they received from the institution upon application in terms of its usefulness, clarity and comprehensiveness. The following picture emerges when using the mean score by sector of study.

	<i>University</i>	<i>Institute</i>
Usefulness	3.95	3.69
Clarity	3.81	3.46
Comprehensiveness	3.81	3.43

The selection process

8.87 Asked whether they were interviewed or not as part of the selection process, the vast majority of respondents replied in the negative (88%). However, when analysed in terms of sector of study (Table 8.27), the picture is slightly different.

	<i>University (%)</i>	<i>Institute (%)</i>
Interviewed	19	8
Not interviewed	81	91

8.88 When asked whether

- a) the interviewer understood the issues facing mature students
- b) the interviewer gave sufficient consideration to the knowledge/experience gained since leaving school
- c) the interview was appropriate to the application

respondents answered in the following way on a scale of 5 (to a considerable extent) to 1 (not at all) using the mean score.

	<i>Mean score</i>
a	4.33
b	4.08
c	4.42

The admissions process

- 8.89 Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 5 (wholly agree) to 1 (totally disagree) the extent to which they agreed with certain statements about the admissions process. Respondents' answers are analysed below using the mean score.

	<i>Mean score</i>
The process was efficient	3.81
It was unduly time-consuming	2.40
It took the circumstances of mature students into account	3.58
It was unduly complex	2.18
It helped me to judge whether I had the capacity for undergraduate study	2.76

- 8.90 The open-ended section of the questionnaire invited respondents to suggest ways in which the admissions process might be improved. Most respondents left this question unanswered. Those who did answer and were not so happy with the process (24), comments included the wasted time taken in the process the bureaucracy, lack of organisation and feedback, late notification, and the need for better opening hours. Others (8) felt that more information about choice of courses, timetable and so on should have been provided prior to admission. Around 23 respondents took the time to indicate that they were happy or satisfied with the process.

Needs of mature students

- 8.91 Respondents were asked whether or not they felt that special attention should be given to the needs of mature students. The vast majority answered positively (75%) while 11% answered 'no' and another 14% did not answer the question. The main difference in terms of the characteristics of respondents lies in their age as shown in Table 8.29.

	<i>23-24 (%)</i>	<i>25-29 (%)</i>	<i>30-44 (%)</i>	<i>45-54 (%)*</i>
Yes	80	86	75	81
No	12	3	13	3

(*Data on the other age groups are not presented as the numbers are small.)

- 8.92 When invited to identify those areas where they thought special attention should be given, the following preferences were expressed by respondents:

76%	Flexibility in the course timetable (attendance)
68%	Help with study skills
68%	Recognition of prior knowledge/experience
55%	Additional access to tutors
50%	Teaching skills
48%	Library opening hours
44%	Use of prior knowledge/experience
36%	Child-care facilities
31%	Additional general counselling

- 8.93 The list also varies somewhat in respect of sector of study as follows (Table 8.30). Beside each is included the mean score derived from respondents' rating on a scale of 5 (to a considerable extent) to 1 (not at all) of the extent to which these 'needs' are found in their institution.

TABLE 8.30

	<i>University % (ranking)</i>	<i>Mean score</i>	<i>Institute % (ranking)</i>	<i>Mean score</i>
Flexibility in the course timetable (attendance)	75 (1)	3.00	76 (1)	3.21
Help with study skills	71 (2)	3.08	67 (3)	2.61
Recognition of prior knowledge/experience	69 (3)	2.85	68 (2)	2.76
Additional access to tutors	49 (5)	2.46	56 (4)	2.66
Teaching skills	46 (6)	3.06	54 (5)	3.14
Library opening hours	54 (4)	2.95	43 (7)	3.18
Use of prior knowledge/experience	42 (8)	2.88	45 (6)	2.69
Child-care facilities	45 (7)	2.04	30 (8)	1.59
Additional general counselling	34 (9)	2.59	28 (9)	2.38

8.94 Much of the analysis above is echoed in the statements made by respondents in the open-ended section of the questionnaire which asked for suggestions of any steps that could be taken to improve the educational experience of mature students. An analysis of these statements is set out in Table 8.31 below (the numbers represent the frequency of statements made by respondents).

TABLE 8.31

	<i>N</i>
Help with study skills	18
More/improved preparatory courses	12
More/improved institutional support (including the need for a dedicated liaison person)	16
Recognition of previous study and experience	13
Improved information about courses	8
More tutorials/access to tutors	12
More IT facilities access/support	4
Better library facilities/access/support	15
Improved teacher skills/knowledge and understanding of mature students' needs	16
More flexible assessments	14
More flexible timetabling provision	31

8.95 Some examples of the above categories can be contextualised in the following quotes.

More/improved institutional support:

'My first experience was mixed. The department was terrific. But the attitude of the college was that we did not exist. The only orientation at that time was a library tour. Last year the same tour was offered – we need positive recognition by the college authorities.'

Many people find universities elitist and intimidating – efforts will have to be made to overcome this:

'Institutions could give parity of esteem to part-time (or evening) courses – not just in words but reflected in the tutor ratio and in the courses offered. In the course I'm doing we have one tutor for the whole of first year evening arts in one subject and we are not offered all of the courses offered by day, but sit the same exam, which puts us at a disadvantage.'

Better library facilities/access:

'The fact that the library is closed on Saturdays means I have to take one day's holiday per month to get to the library in Dublin.'

'I would welcome access to course materials – books etc on a longer basis. The course books are seldom available on these days and if they are the period of two weeks is too short. Mature students have no choice but to buy books as the library does not cater for our needs.'

Improved teaching skills/knowledge and understanding of mature students' needs:

'Lecturers should treat mature students as adults and not children.'

'Try to encourage full-time lecturers and teachers to take on courses in the evenings. It helps to promote the feeling of 'equivalence' with full-time students.'

'Some of the lecturers seem to find us – night students – a nuisance. I feel we don't get the same care and attention that the day students get.'

'Sometimes lecturers practice a specific style of teaching on all their students. As a mature student, I find this at times patronising. I don't pay £500 per year to be told off by specific lecturers, half my age, for not doing homework. I hold down a full-time job and busy home life, lecturers should take note.'

More flexible timetabling/provision:

'More flexible hours are needed – maybe Saturdays instead of late evenings.'

Attitude of younger students and staff

8.96 Respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 5 (very much agree) to 1 (very much disagree), the extent to which they agreed with the following statements. The mean score is shown alongside each statement.

TABLE 8.32	<i>Mean score</i>
Younger students have generally been very welcoming and helpful to mature students	3.27
I feel put off by the attitude of younger students towards mature students	1.92
Lecturers have generally been very welcoming and helpful to mature students	4.30
I feel put off by the attitude of lecturers towards mature students	1.74
Other staff have generally been very welcoming and helpful to mature students	4.00
I feel put off by the attitude of other staff	1.57

Expectations and experience to date

8.97 Respondents were asked to indicate how their experiences to date met their expectations: whether they had broadly been met, whether they had been exceeded, or whether they had not been met. The majority (63%) stated that their experiences to date broadly met with their expectations. More men (67%) than women (60%) indicated that their experiences had broadly met their expectations. Other differences lie in the sector of study of the respondents as shown below (Table 8.33).

TABLE 8.33	<i>University (%)</i>	<i>Institute (%)</i>
My experience broadly meets my expectations	75	76
My experience to date exceeds my expectations	16	7
My experience to date does not meet my expectations	8	13

Open and distance learning

8.98 In the open-ended section provided in the questionnaire survey, respondents were invited to give their views on open and distance learning. They were asked whether or not the wider availability of open and distance learning would have made it easier to start higher education. The following analysis of the statements has been made (the numbers represent the frequency of replies).

TABLE 8.34	<i>N</i>
Yes	92
No	63
Maybe	2
No answer given	62

8.99 Many respondents dismissed the idea of open and distance learning because they felt they lacked the discipline to study alone or wanted the ambience of the institutional environment as these quotes demonstrate:

‘I personally don’t think as a first time third-level student I would have managed my course without the support of fellow students on my course – so distance learning wouldn’t have been my first choice.’

‘I have never been interested in distance or the Open University. I love the buzz of the college, individual lecturers and meeting fellow students.’

8.100 Other respondents dismissed open and distance learning because of the expense involved. Those who responded positively did so for reasons which the following quotes exemplify.

‘Most courses are only available on a full/part-time basis in the large towns and cities which victimises those who live in a rural or more isolated setting.’

‘I travel to my college three times per week, a distance of 35 miles each way. I would appreciate an option of distance learning.’

Other general comments

8.101 Respondents were invited in the open-ended section of the questionnaire survey to add any other general comments. Many did, and a great variety of responses were provided as the following quotations demonstrate.

‘The lack of tutors for part-time students is a disgrace. Part-time students struggle through the practicals and no assistance is given.’

‘Mature students in rural areas do not have a great choice despite population growth – Ireland is still very centred in Dublin as regards choice for mature students, particularly in specialist areas.’

B. Profile of mature students who were attending preparatory courses in third-level institutions

8.102 Questionnaires were sent to those mature students who were currently on access courses in four universities, one institute and another institution during the academic year 2000/01. Sixty-eight questionnaires were sent out; 38 were returned which represents a 56% response.

Characteristics of the questionnaire respondents

Gender

8.103 The number of male respondents was 17 (45%) and female 20 (53%); one respondent did not state their gender.

Age

8.104 The age breakdown of respondents by gender is as follows:

TABLE 8.35	23-24	25-29	30-44	45-54	55-59	60-64	65+	Median age
Men (N)	2	2	5	6	-	-	2	43
Women (N)	2	2	9	7	-	-	-	39
Total	4	4	14	14*	-	-	2	41

(* Includes the respondent who did not state their gender.)

Courses being taken

8.105 Respondents indicated they were taking the following courses (three respondents did not provide this information):

- access course (16)
- return to learning course (12)
- foundation course (2)
- other course (5)

8.106 Asked whether on successful completion of these courses, the respondents would gain automatic entry into a third-level course, 16 said 'no', 14 said 'yes' and eight left it unanswered. Of the 14 who answered 'yes', 12 were studying at university. Of the 16 that answered 'no', 14 were at university. In terms of the level of qualification they hoped to obtain from the third-level course that they plan to take in the future, the majority (32) were hoping to gain a degree. Of the 38 respondents, 20 were hoping to study a third-level course in the Arts and Humanities.

Sector of study

8.107 Thirty respondents were studying at university; of these, 13 were men and 16 were women (one respondent did not state their gender). Four were studying at the institutes; all four were men and of the four studying at 'college/other', all were women (except one who did not state their gender).

Mode of study

TABLE 8.36

	<i>Full-time (N)</i>	<i>Part-time (N)</i>
Access	4	12
Return to Learning	1	10
Foundation	1	1
Other	5	-
Not stated	3	-

- 8.108 Of those 23 studying part-time, 13 were women and of the 14 studying full-time, six were men and seven were women (one did not disclose their gender). Twenty of those studying part-time were at university, and of the 14 studying full-time, nine were at university and four at the institutes of technology.

Other characteristics

- 8.109 All respondents cited their country of citizenship as Ireland. Thirty were born in Ireland; six were born elsewhere and two respondents did not state where they were born. Thirty-six respondents gave their ethnicity as 'White Irish'. Four respondents (two men and two women) stated that they were registered disabled. Eighteen respondents stated that they had carer responsibilities; the majority being women (12). No dominant pattern emerged from the responses regarding socio-economic status.

Questions asked

- 8.110 (NB: not all the questions asked in the questionnaire have been analysed. This is because many respondents did not complete the full list of questions. In some cases therefore the highest response was 'no response').

Reasons for returning to education

- 8.111 Respondents were invited to indicate *all* the relevant reasons for wanting to return to higher education. In many cases respondents chose more than one reason. The most important reasons stated were:

- to pursue an interest in academic study (84%)
- for personal development (61%)
- to enable a change in career (47%)
- to help gain employment (37%)
- to reduce the chance of being unemployed (32%)
- to advance present career (21%)

- 8.112 When asked to cite the *most* important reason, 'personal development' (32%) came out top, followed by 'to enable a change in career' (26%) and 'to pursue and interest in academic study' (24%). In the open-ended section of the questionnaire, respondents indicated a number of changes in their lives that gave them the opportunity to become a mature student. Many (11) said that their children were now self-sufficient (i.e., had reached school age, were going to university or had left home). Ten indicated that their personal circumstances had changed, seven reported a change in workplace circumstances and four had identified a personal need for study.

Completion of Leaving Certificate

- 8.113 Twenty-four of the 38 respondents had completed their Leaving Certificate. Of the 13 that had not, eight stated they 'wanted/had to earn money' as the reason (one respondent did not answer this question).

Barriers facing mature students

- 8.114 When asked to identify *all* the significant barriers they had to overcome to become a mature student (i.e., respondents were invited to identify more than one), the following picture emerged:

TABLE 8.37

	<i>All (N)</i>	<i>Men (ranking)</i>	<i>Women (ranking)</i>
Inadequate academic preparation	22	1	2

Lack of confidence	22	2	1
Lack of finance	19	1	3
Lack of knowledge of available opportunities	15	3	4
Need to care for children	13	4	3

8.115 When asked to identify the *most* significant barrier, 'lack of finance' came out top for both men and women (47% and 40% respectively). Financial issues were those most mentioned by most respondents in the open-ended section of the questionnaire when asked what policies might be adopted by government or institutions to help increase the number of mature students. Eighteen said that there should be more/better financial aid; five specifically mentioned increasing the student grant; four said that part-time fees should be abolished and three pointed to the costs and availability of child-care. Two quotes give a flavour of the responses in this context.

'It's vital to receive financial support. The irony for me is that while attending the access courses, I'm unable to take up employment and so can have my payment stopped by Social Welfare. It's only when you are accepted for university that your payments are guaranteed.'

'The primary hurdle for most mature students, outside lack of confidence and the length of time spent outside education, is that of the financial strain of attending university. In Ireland, those who have spent at least 156 days in receipt of unemployment assistance/benefit, are entitled to a Back To Education Allowance (BTEA), equal to their dole payment, as well as maintenance grants. Those who work full-time are essentially penalised for being employed. This would make it difficult for them to return to education. Ultimately the BTEA should be available for all mature students, within reasonable income limits.'

(Other suggested policies included more provision of courses (by five respondents).)

Learning about the course

8.116 'Direct contact with the institution' and 'press advertisement' were the reasons cited by 10 and 10 respondents respectively when answering the question about how they first learnt about their course. Seven identified 'friend of family member'; four mentioned 'careers advisor', three 'employer' and two 'existing mature student'. The open-ended section of the questionnaire asked what policies might encourage more people to apply to become mature students; 11 respondents indicated that more and better information and promotion of educational opportunities is needed.

Information provided by the institution

8.117 Respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 5 is extremely good and 1 extremely poor), the information they received from the institution upon application in terms of its usefulness, clarity and comprehensiveness. The following picture emerges when using the mean score:

	<i>Mean score</i>
Usefulness	4.05
Clarity	4.05
Comprehensiveness	3.92

The selection process

8.118 Asked whether they were interviewed or not as part of the selection process, only five respondents replied in the negative. When asked whether

- the interviewer understood the issues facing mature students,
- the interviewer gave sufficient consideration to the knowledge/experience gained since leaving school,
- the interview was appropriate to the application,

respondents answered in the following way on a scale of 5 (to a considerable extent) to 1 (not at all) using the mean score.

	<i>Mean score</i>
a	4.55
b	4.55
c	4.48

The admissions process

8.119 Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 5 (wholly agree) to 1 (totally disagree) the extent to which they agreed with certain statements about the admissions process. Respondents' answers are analysed below using the mean score.

TABLE 8.39	<i>Mean score</i>
The process was efficient	4.31
It was unduly time-consuming	1.97
It took the circumstances of mature students into account	4.06
It was unduly complex	1.81
It helped me to judge whether I had the capacity for undergraduate study.	3.38

8.120 On the whole respondents did not seem to have experienced difficulties with the admissions process and this is borne out by the responses made (or not) in the open-ended section of questionnaire.

Experiences at the institution

8.121 Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 5 (entirely appropriate) to 1 (wholly inappropriate) the extent to which they agreed that their course balances subject-related material and general study skills. The majority scored 5 (17); the overall mean score was 4.00. Respondents were also asked to rate on a scale of 5 (to a very great extent) to 1 (not at all), the extent to which they agreed with the following statements. The mean score is shown alongside each statement.

TABLE 8.40	<i>Mean score</i>
Students on the course are treated as adults	4.57
The administrative arrangements (such as fee collection) are appropriate to the needs of mature students	3.86
The ethos of the institution suits the needs of young students and can be off-putting to older students	2.41
The teaching staff understand the needs of mature students	4.17
The teaching staff patronise mature students	1.38
Mature students need their own common room	3.03
Mature students have adequate access to tutors	4.14
There are adequate general counselling (advisory arrangements) for mature students in place	3.49

- 8.122 A range of issues were raised by respondents in the open-ended section of the questionnaire when they were invited to suggest any steps that could be taken to improve the educational experience of mature students. Responses included: help with study skills, more/improved preparatory courses, more/improved institutional support, more IT facilities/access/support, better library facilities (including access and support), improved teacher skills/knowledge of mature students' needs, and more flexible timetabling/provision.

Expectations and experience to date

- 8.123 Respondents were asked to indicate how their experiences to date met their expectations: whether they had broadly been met, whether they had been exceeded, or whether they had not been met. The majority (25) stated that their experiences to date broadly met with their expectations, 10 felt that they had been exceeded, whilst three felt their expectations had not been met.

Sources of financial support

- 8.124 When asked to identify the major form of financial support while on their course, most respondents (nine) identified their partner or spouse (13 left the question unanswered).

Open and distance learning

- 8.125 When asked in the open-ended section of the questionnaire whether the wider availability of open and distance learning would have made it easier for respondents to start higher education, the majority responded negatively (15). Ten answered 'yes', one was undecided and 12 gave no answer to this question. The following quotes give a flavour of the responses made.

'As I live within the city centre it is not a problem for me to travel to the campus. If I were living in an area that made it inaccessible for me to reach the campus, then open and distance learning would be an advantage.'

'No. I think I need the personal interaction with the tutors – especially to explain new concepts and formulas etc.'

'Availability is very much desirable but I would have found the cost too much. Open and distance learning should be subsidised. What's the point in availability if those who most need/desire access to education can't afford it. This defeats the purpose. Government needs to start committing in a real way to adult education.'

C. Profile of mature students who were unsuccessful in gaining entry to third-level study

- 8.126 Questionnaires were sent out to those students who had applied through the CAO system as 'mature students' (full-time study only) and those who had applied directly through the institutions' own admissions system (for both full and part-time study) during the academic year 2000/01. Two hundred and ninety-seven questionnaires were sent to those who applied through CAO and 171 through the institutions (a total of 468 questionnaires); 73 were returned giving a response rate of 16%. Such a low

response rate is not surprising, given the nature of the target group. In addition, six respondents did not state their mode of study and have therefore been excluded from the following analysis of 67 respondents.

Characteristics of the questionnaire respondents

8.127 The number of male respondents was 26 (39%) and female 41 (61%). Fifty-eight respondents had applied for full-time study: 24 to universities, 15 to ITs and 10 to the colleges and elsewhere (eight did not answer the question). Of the nine applying for part-time study, 5 had made applications to universities. Seventeen of the 58 applicants for full-time study had applied for Arts and Humanities courses. The majority of those applying for full-time study (21) were in the 30-44 age range; 17 in the age range 25-29 and 13 in the age range 23-24. The majority of those applying for part-time study (4) were in the age range 30-44. The majority of respondents (60) cited their country of citizenship as Ireland. Fifty-one stated they were born in Ireland. Sixty respondents classified their ethnicity as 'White Irish'. Nine stated that they were registered disabled. Thirteen respondents stated that they had carer responsibilities. Of these 13, eight respondents were women. No dominant category emerged in socio-economic status and many had chosen not to answer this question.

Questions asked

8.128 (NB: not all the questions asked in the questionnaire have been analysed. This is because many respondents did not complete the full list of questions. In some cases therefore the highest response was 'no response'. In addition, because the number of respondents who applied for part-time study is so low and because their responses are so widely distributed across the options supplied for many of the questions, some of the results concerning this category of applicant have not been included in the analysis below).

Reasons for returning to education

8.129 Respondents were invited to indicate *all* the relevant reasons for seeking entry to higher education. In many cases therefore respondents chose more than one reason. The most important reasons stated by those applicants for full-time study were:

- to pursue an interest in academic study (71%)
- for personal development (62%)
- to enable a change in career (38%)
- to help gain employment (33%)
- to advance my present career (28%)
- to reduce the chance of being unemployed (24%).

8.130 When asked to state the most important reason, 'to enable a change in career' (15) came out top for full-time applicants (19) and for part-time applicants 'personal development' (four).

8.131 In the open-ended section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate whether there had been any changes in their lives that had given them the opportunity to become a mature student. Of those that chose to provide information, the vast majority (20) indicated that they had identified a personal need for study and that their children were now self-sufficient (i.e., were attending school/university or had left home). Other reasons mentioned by respondents included changes in family/personal circumstances, an increase in financial income, changes in workplace circumstances and the availability of courses in the local area.

Completion of Leaving Certificate

8.132 Forty-seven of the 58 applicants seeking full-time study had completed their Leaving Certificate. More women than men had done so (30 against 17). Seven of the nine part-time applicants had completed their Leaving Certificate.

Preparatory courses

8.133 Asked whether or not a preparatory course had been taken prior to seeking entry to third-level study, 19 of the full-time applicants answered 'yes' and 33 'no'. A greater proportion of women (12) than men

(seven) had taken such courses. Of the part-time applicants seven of the nine had taken a preparatory course.

Reasons for choice of course

8.134 In terms of the choice of the course respondents had applied for, the reasons given by those applying for full-time study were career/interest (30), interest in the subject (20) and career reasons (7). The majority of the respondents applying for part-time study (five) gave as their reason career/interest.

Learning about the course applied for

8.135 'Direct contact with the institution' was the most cited reason by respondents applying for full-time study (25) when asked how they first learnt about the course they had applied for. The other most cited reason was friend or family member (nine), followed by 'carers advisor' (seven). When asked in the open-ended section of the questionnaire whether there were policies that might be adopted by government or institutions to help increase the number of mature applicants, five respondents specifically stated that better information and promotion of educational opportunities needs to be done.

Information provided by the institution

8.136 Respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 5 is extremely good and 1 extremely poor), the information they received from the institution upon application in terms of its usefulness, clarity and comprehensiveness. Mean score results of the 58 respondents applying for full-time study on all three aspects were between 3 and 4.

Advice before application

8.137 Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they had sought advice before applying for the course. Twenty-three of those applying for full-time study said 'yes' and 13 'no', although 22 respondents did not answer this question. Probed further about whom they had sought this advice from, the results were friend or family member (26), direct contact with the institution (23), careers advisor (13) and existing mature student (seven).

The selection process

8.138 Asked whether they were interviewed or not as part of the selection process, the vast majority of respondents applying for full-time study replied in the negative (35 of the 58). Of those applying for part-time study, all nine respondents replied in the negative. When asked whether

- a) the interviewer understood the issues facing mature students
- b) the interviewer gave sufficient consideration to the knowledge/experience gained since leaving school
- c) the interview was appropriate to the application

those respondents who were interviewed for full-time study (23) answered in the following way on a scale of 5 (to a considerable extent) to 1 (not at all) using the mean score.

	<i>Mean score</i>
a	4.10
b	3.95
c	3.95

8.139 When the same respondents were asked whether the admissions process had helped them to judge whether they had the capacity for undergraduate study, the mean score resulting from the same scale as above was 1.66.

Feedback from the institution

8.140 When asked whether or not they were informed by the institution about why they had been unsuccessful in gaining a place, the majority of respondents applying for full-time study answered 'no' (21); 16 answered 'yes', although 21 respondents chose not to answer this question. Respondents were also asked whether or not they were given advice and/or other options for future study. The majority (38) responded negatively. In the open-ended section of the questionnaire, respondents were invited to suggest ways in which the admissions process might be improved. In the analysis of the responses that were provided, it became clear that this set of applicants were not happy about their experiences of the admissions process; 19 respondents specifically indicated as much. The following quotes (all from applicants for full-time study) give some indication of their experiences.

'I would have appreciated information, feedback on my application, to know why it was unsuccessful. I would have liked the results of my aptitude test. I have no idea whether I did well or badly.'

'If the applicant isn't successful, encourage them to apply again. Recognise that when they made the application, that they really would love a place.'

'It would have been of benefit to me if I was told sooner about not getting a place as I had to wait a whole year to be told.'

'The criteria by which a mature student is considered are not clear therefore it is not possible for the prospective student to give a full picture of themselves on the application form. Every mature student should have an interview.'

'There is still a somewhat unnecessary emphasis on Leaving Certificate results. I can categorically state that I did as little study for my LC as was humanly possible and therefore my results, while they weren't substandard, were not top of the class. Since leaving school I have put every effort into my studies ... and am currently top of the class in my degree. Just a reminder that ability is certainly not easily visualised in Leaving Certificate results.'

'The aptitude test is essential but it should not be the only criterion for rejection. It should be followed by interview to assess the person's background, aspirations, hopes etc.'

'I was utterly disappointed at not being accepted – I felt very alone because I had felt more like a 'statistic' rather than human – I had been ill-advised in completing the CAO form – lost a lot of money and no-one cared. No one had time to discuss my situation with me.'

Barriers facing mature students

8.141 When asked to identify *all* significant barriers facing mature students (i.e., respondents were invited to identify more than one), the following reasons were given by full-time applicants: lack of finance (28), lack of knowledge of available opportunities (23), inadequate academic preparation (21), lack of confidence (15) and travel (13). When asked to identify the *most* significant barrier, 'lack of finance' came out top for both full and part-time applicants.

8.142 In the open-ended section of the questionnaire, respondents were invited to suggest policies that might be adopted by the government or institutions that might help increase the number of people who apply to become a mature student. To mirror the responses above, more/better financial aid was mentioned by 27 respondents; 10 specifically indicated the high cost of child-care and the availability of facilities; seven mentioned the need to increase the student grant, four wanted part-time fees abolished, and a further four suggested more tax allowances. The following quotation from one respondent exemplifies these issues.

'As most mature students pay full fees, they could offer some sort of tax benefit to say a couple where one was studying. The child-care situation in Ireland is very poorly supported by the state at present and is under review currently. They should offer free child-care to those who cannot afford it to encourage young under-educated to participate. If applicants can afford and are willing to pay, provided they demonstrate an ability to pursue a college course, I believe they should all be offered places and encouraged. A lot of capable and intelligent eager students like me who have paid huge taxes over the last 25 years are turned away for no good reason.' (Full-time applicant)

8.143 Also within this category, a large number of respondents (20) suggested that there should be more places available to mature students as demonstrated in this quote from one respondent.

'Increase the number of places available, as the course I applied for, there was only one place on offer.' (Full-time applicant)

8.144 Also in the open-ended section, respondents were invited to suggest any steps that could be taken to improve the educational experience of mature students. A range of responses was provided including: more/improved preparatory courses, more/improved institutional support, improved teacher skills/knowledge and understanding of mature students' needs, and more flexible timetabling/provision.

Open and distance learning

8.145 The open-ended section of the questionnaire invited respondents to say whether or not the wider availability of open and distance learning would have made it easier for them to start higher education. Eighteen respondents answered positively, 17 said 'no', two were undecided and 14 chose not to answer the question. The following two quotes sum-up the positive and negative replies given, again both from full-time applicants.

'Yes, undoubtedly. To commute from Cavan to Dublin daily would have been a nightmare, had my application been successful.'

'No. I prefer on-campus full-time to either part-time or off-campus. My only problem is the distance.'

Other general comments

8.146 It became clear in the analysis of respondents' comments that not all the 'unsuccessful' applicants had been put off by their experiences. Some had obviously persevered in their attempts and desire to enter third-level education and had been successful as this quotation from a full-time applicant demonstrates.

'In 2000 I applied to three colleges in Ireland ... but wasn't successful (in two). I was accepted by X ... I am now in the first year (full-time study). It has been everything and more than I could have wished for. There is a lot of hard work involved and I find writing essays difficult. But I realise the wonderful opportunity I have received and really appreciate that.'

D. Profile of mature students taking Post-Leaving Certificate

- 8.147 With the help of six Vocational Education Committees, questionnaires were sent out to mature students who are currently on PLC and other courses during the academic year 2000/01. A total of 300 questionnaires were sent out; only 55 were sent back which represents a 18% response rate.

Characteristics of the questionnaire respondents

- 8.148 The number of male respondents were 10 and female 45. The majority (24) were in the 30-44 age range. Asked to describe the course they are taking at present, the majority stated VTOS course (26) followed by Post-Leaving Certificate course (22). The majority of respondents were studying full-time (42). Forty-two respondents cited their country of citizenship as Ireland. Thirty-three were born in Ireland; 21 were born elsewhere and one respondent did not state where they were born. Forty-three respondents gave their ethnicity as 'White Irish'. The majority of the remainder (seven) gave their ethnicity as 'White European'. Six respondents (two men and four women) stated that they were registered disabled. Twenty-three respondents stated that they had carer responsibilities; the majority being women (19). No dominant category emerged for socio-economic status and indeed a large proportion of respondents did not answer this question.

Questions asked

- 8.149 (NB: not all the questions asked in the questionnaire have been analysed. This is because many respondents did not complete the full list of questions. In some cases therefore the highest response was 'no response').

Reasons for returning to education

- 8.150 Respondents were invited to indicate *all* the relevant reasons for wanting to return to higher education. In many cases therefore respondents chose more than one reason. The most important reasons stated were:

- for personal development (71%)
- to help gain employment (56%)
- to pursue an interest in academic study (53%)
- to enable a change in career (51%)
- to reduce the chance of being unemployed (42%)

8.151 When asked to cite the most important reason 'to enable a change in career' came out top (16), followed by 'personal development' (15) and 'to help gain employment' (14).

8.152 In the open-ended section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked whether there had been any changes in their lives that gave them the opportunity to become mature students. Sixteen indicated that their children had become self-sufficient (i.e., they had reached school age, they were going to university or they had left home); 10 indicated that there had been a change in their personal/family circumstances; six had identified a personal need for study; and five had had a change in their workplace circumstance (such as retirement).

Completion of Leaving Certificate

8.153 Thirty-two respondents had completed their Leaving Certificate. Of the 18 that had not, 10 stated the 'need to earn money' as the reason (five supplied no reason).

Entry to third-level study

8.154 Asked whether on successful completion of their course, the respondents would apply for entry to a third-level course, 12 said 'yes', but the vast majority (35) replied in the negative (eight left this question unanswered).

Barriers facing mature students

8.155 When asked to identify *all* the significant barriers they had to overcome to become a mature student (i.e., respondents were invited to identify more than one), lack of finance, lack of knowledge of available opportunities, lack of confidence, and the need to care for children – all came out top. When asked to identify the *most* significant barrier, 'lack of finance' again came out top. Financial issues were the ones most mentioned in the open-ended section of the questionnaire when respondents were asked to suggest policies that might be adopted by government or institutions to help increase the number of people who apply to become mature students. Nineteen indicated that there should be better financial aid than is currently provided; 16 specifically mentioned the high costs of child-care and the availability of facilities; six wanted the student grant increased and another five mentioned allowances for travel and transport. Other issues raised by this question were better information and promotion of educational opportunities, and more provision of courses. The following quotations provide a flavour of these issues:

'Increased financial support is needed. The six month unemployed criteria to qualify for BTEA should be abolished. The HEA grant should be increased. Money earned from part-time employment should not affect 'rent supplement'.'

'Courses need to suit the time mature students have while their children attend school (i.e., part-time). Courses need to be run in their own area not always in major towns. Transport is still a problem for some – plus the expense of books, folders etc ... More information is needed about local courses – through local papers, mass newsletters.'

'I have to work Thursday and Saturday nights to pay £75 a week child-care costs. I have less family time and no study time.'

'Those with young children could do with crèche facilities or a better allowance towards child-minding costs. The courses would be better if students knew they could be done over several years as many can't devote full-time hours, especially if they are working full-time in the home'

'The VTOS scheme is rewarding and a great opportunity for older students. The facilities for child-care need to be examined more closely.'

‘More advertising is needed. Courses should be based locally – very important, and there should be more variety of courses.’

‘In the interests of ‘life-long’ learning I would like there to be plenty of study courses available to suit all ages and interests and abilities. Courses that build one on the other are good for people who lack confidence in their ability and their potential.’

8.156 When asked whether the availability of open and distance learning would have made it easier to start higher education, 24 responded positively, 14 said ‘no’, two were undecided, and 15 gave no answer. The following two quotes provide examples of the statements given by respondents.

‘Yes, definitely. I hope to start third-level education by distance and open learning.’

‘This would not have made it easier because in most cases where distance learning is concerned, you need to have a computer and these are expensive.’

PART IV: Conclusions and Recommendations

CHAPTER 9. OUR EVALUATION

The wider policy context: an additional 10,000 students?

- 9.1 Our brief was centrally concerned with the response of institutions to the targeted initiative. But their efforts are conditioned and to some extent restricted by the wider policy context in which they work. We therefore raise issues first about the general policy frame in which the initiative is mounted. In this context, we share the view of many other commentators and of government that universities will be able to meet the national targets only if there is a decisive shift towards part-time and distance education courses.
- 9.2 The recruitment of an additional 10,000 mature students over a reasonable period of time, say five years, does not seem to be an unreasonable target from the supply side, especially since the numbers of school leaver applicants are certain to decline. Our only reservation on that score is that, in view of some of our observations about teaching styles and conditions, at least some relief to staffing ratios will be desirable.
- 9.3 The difficulty will be on the demand side. We have noted the view of some universities that there is no great degree of unsatisfied demand from potential mature applicants. Yet since the numbers of mature members of the population without third-level education is high, the weak demand must be a function of the attractiveness and relevance of higher education. We take each of these points in turn.
- 9.4 Table 2.3 (page 27) shows that the proportion of those who have completed their education by third-level qualifications is 19%. The variations between regions are large, although we must take into account the likely migration to the Dublin area where 50% of university places are located. This recruitment ratio represents a significant achievement in moving from an elite to a mass system, but also presents a gauge by which to specify future policy plans. The UK is aiming for an ultimate figure of 50% or more; it is likely that Ireland could reach a similar proportion.
- 9.5 In Figure 2.1 (page 30) we represented the reservoir of potential mature students by pointing to the numbers of qualified school leavers between 1965 and 1998 who had not entered third-level education. The numbers leaving school between 1996 and 2001 have varied between 66,000 to 63,000 (*Report of the Review Committee on Post Secondary Education and Training Places, 1999, Table 5.2*). As shown in Figure 2.1, between 9% and 29% of those with Leaving Certificates did not enter third-level education. It is therefore manifest that there are far more qualified non-entrants than would be necessary to fill the 10,000 places. And this takes no account of the many potential students who do not possess school leaving qualifications.
- 9.6 A further factor is that many institutions believe that the recent economic success of the Republic has provided plenty of easily accessible employment for those who might otherwise have recruited themselves as mature students. Unfortunately that dimension of opportunity is changing, but it should help to enhance recruitment to third-level education.
- 9.7 The high proportion of respondents to our survey who possess Leaving Certificates suggests that many mature students could be described as delayed entrants rather than those who had had to overcome a poor school experience. Our survey, which reinforces many of the conclusions reached in previous studies, brings out some of the factors affecting mature student recruitment:
- the main reasons for mature students – both full and part-time – returning to education are career-related. Are courses sufficiently fashioned to meet this need?
 - financial issues – the need and/or desire to earn money – were the significant reasons provided by respondents (both full and part-time) for not embarking on third-level study after completing their Leaving Certificates
 - financial issues continue to play a major role as the main barrier identified by respondents to becoming a mature student

- the universities are not providing opportunities for mature students in those disciplines that are most closely related to the needs of the Irish economy. Moreover, those opportunities that are provided by third-level institutions need to be better promoted
 - both full and part-time respondents felt that third-level institutions should give special attention to the needs of mature students. For full-time mature students more help is required with study skills; for part-time mature students, flexibility in the timetable is important
 - more needs to be done by third-level institutions to close the gap, in relation to the needs of mature students, between expectations and delivery
 - opportunities to study through open and distance learning are a more attractive option for those respondents who are currently studying part-time than for those studying full-time.
- 9.8 We feel confident that there is potential demand that should be met, but at present too much of it is latent. The issue for institutions is how can they change their recruitment and provision practices to meet the target.
- 9.9 The first step must be for institutions to make a thorough review of the local and regional context within which each institution will attempt to recruit. They vary greatly in the circumstances with which they must contend. The obvious variants in potential are whether the institutions deal with small or large potential catchment areas, and their occupational patterns. Especially, those located in the more thinly populated areas will have to choose between full-time, part-time and distance provision. Those choices will have to be market-tested locally, and for each group of subjects. Travel is difficult and costly and creative packages will have to be constructed that might provide combinations of distance learning, blocks of full-time attendance on campus and outposts of instruction in regional centres. At the same time, we do not under-estimate the cost and difficulty of urban students in moving to and from campuses. These factors must help determine what is provided.
- 9.10 Second, mature students are generally not taking up places in universities in those courses most closely related to the needs of the Irish economy. If third-level education is to meet specific shortages in the labour market, at least some courses - no one would want to reduce access to courses not geared to employment - must be designed and targeted for that purpose, in co-operation with the employment system, which will always lend power to higher education recruitment. This will mean a variety of subject choices and of length and mode of study. Inasmuch as potential recruits are inhibited from taking some courses which give access to employment in shortage areas but require background in 'hard' subjects', special preparatory courses should be offered for them.
- 9.11 Third, many of the needs of the labour market might be better met by shorter courses for experienced professionals rather than full-time undergraduate courses which mature students tend to take in the humanities and social science rather than in the economically shortage areas. Many universities already do this, and their experiences should be built upon.
- 9.12 Finally, particularly if the system as a whole is to meet the skills needs of employment, it seems obvious that the contributions of the universities should be interlocked with the contribution to be made by the institutes of technology. Preferably, they should share the creation of local plans with the universities, as, indeed, some already do.
- 9.13 We have made recommendations elsewhere touching on issues of recruitment including further review of the student aid available to part-time students, and stronger national and institutional efforts in advertising and recruitment campaigns. The timing of classes, the availability of child-care facilities are also issues to be taken into account. A more uniform and interchangeable system of entrance testing and qualification may also make higher recruitment rates more possible.
- 9.14 The key is to achieve more flexible forms of provision that might involve
- part-time education
 - distance education
 - career-related disciplines

- links with employers
- partnerships between distance learning and campus-based providers
- short courses that carry academic credit and can be accumulated towards a conventional academic award.

9.15 Institutions should be asked to bring forward plans that would support an increase in the numbers of mature students and told that, in allocating places, priority would be given to proposals that involve the more flexible forms of provision stated above.

The terms of reference

9.16 Our terms of reference as set by the HEA are given in paragraph 1.3. The following sections respond to these and are denoted by the italicised headings below. In doing so, we have taken particular note of the factors indicated by the HEA as those that it would bear in mind in determining allocations for the initiative. They were:

- the extent to which proposals are located within a coherent institutional strategy
- whether projects are new initiatives or will give significant added value to existing programmes
- the capacity to maximise effective use of existing institutional resources and infrastructure
- the sustainability of the projects given that there are not guarantees that the funding will be included in subsequent year's budgets
- the priority afforded by the institution to individual projects seeking targeted funding generally
- the priority given to individual projects seeking targeted funding generally
- the priority given to developing partnerships between colleges and other higher and further education institutions, and with appropriate external bodies, whether public, private or voluntary with a view to supplementing, not supplanting existing efforts
- provision of evaluation of outcomes and dissemination of results
- contribution towards other HEA objectives e.g., modularisation, innovative teaching methods, gender equality etc.

(i) assess the effectiveness of the measures to which the funding contributes and to establish what additional measures may be needed to improve effectiveness

9.17 The first issue put to us was the effectiveness of the measures to which the funding contributes. Some interviewees believe that at best their institution is on the brink of a move forward, without as yet adequate structures for advancing the cause of mature students. Some institutions, including both of the colleges, have long reputations for their commitment to entry for a high number of mature students. To most institutions, the targeted initiative did not create the mature student issue, and mostly built on what was already being done. The initiative could not of itself create a radical shift in the institutions to wholesale policies and practices favouring the recruitment of mature students, but the funds made available under it have been well spent. It has heightened attention to the issue of mature access and provided resources that were critical to advancing policy and practice. Although some in the institutions regard the initiative as marginal to efforts already being made, the success of the initiative is both symbolic and specific, in the following ways:

- the level of ultimate responsibility for the implementation of the initiative is often impressively high; it is the connection between the university and the departments and other units that may still need strengthening
- the award of funding has raised awareness of the mature student issue in institutions
- it has enabled key appointments to be made such as mature students officers and access officers. Their work can be an important addition to institutions' capacity to recruit and support mature students
- it has enabled units to be set up in some places which not only provide key services and facilitate the co-ordination of activities for mature students, but also bring in different dimensions of thought and policy consideration to the academic community

-
- it has made possible specific provision in the form of preparatory courses, study workshops in time management, stress management, essay writing, note-taking and exam techniques
 - it has made possible support for mature students once in course.

9.18 We were also asked to establish what additional measures may be needed to improve effectiveness. Some of the measures necessary to enhancement lie outside the powers of institutions, and we will return to them in paragraphs 9.19 and 9.20. The institutions themselves vary greatly in their application to the objectives of the initiative; they are on a continuum ranging from those whose institutional commitment is deep, to those where institutional success in working with mature students has depended on the work of dedicated individuals. We will note (paragraphs 9.21 and 9.22) what improvements in their approaches, and those of academic staff, are seen as necessary, though we must be chary of over-generalising points for criticism.

Additional measures: national level

9.19 We asked in institutions what additional national initiatives might be helpful in the drive to increase the proportion of mature students. On the role of the central agency, they wanted to keep the relative freedom to experiment allowed under the initiative. There was a particular plea not for more policies and guidance but recognition of particular regional needs for specific resources: 'We have to weigh the benefits of centralised funding and monitoring without stifling creativity from the student upwards. Funding and monitoring should be flexible enough to respond to institutional direction. Better to foster what is there.' At the same time there was considerable support for the view that there were issues on which the centre should give leadership, perhaps through a central agency to establish best practice if there were gaps, and have overall responsibility for the broader picture. For the institutional efforts to be fully successful contextual factors such as financial support for mature students need attention, and only national government can do that.

9.20 The contributions to be made by the central agency to the achievement of the initiative might be as follows:

Recruitment

- we share the view of other observers that the objective of recruiting 15% of university students from mature applicants will not succeed unless there is a radical shift in recruitment targets towards part-time students (paragraph 3.7 (i) and (ii))
- the recruitment of mature students in Ireland in comparison with other countries has been understated (paragraph 2.3). There is, however, a substantial gap between Ireland and other countries which for a range of reasons – equity and labour shortages – needs to be filled
- central and institutional recruitment advertising need to be strengthened (paragraph 4.35)

Student and institutional finance

- financial support and associated tax and social relief provision for mature students need overhaul to enable part-timers (paragraphs 6.4 – 6.8), including those engaged in open and distance education, to be treated in the same way as full-time students
- the UK has recently allowed a 5% grant premium to institutions for mature and part-time students. A similar provision in Ireland would help institutions meet the additional costs of recruiting and servicing non-full-time students, and give a clear policy signal
- many of the projects look well entrenched but there is uncertainty about their capacity to continue without central funding. Institutions use the initiative funds effectively but many do not give priority to projects receiving targeted funding
- the fact that allocations are made on annual basis makes it difficult for universities to offer reasonable staff contracts to those working in the area, such as mature student officers. Uncertainty makes it more difficult to bring about long term changes

Connections with public sector institutions

- there are good examples of co-operation and partnerships with other higher and further education institutions, and with other public, private or voluntary bodies. Some concern about encroachment has been worked out well by one university. This evokes the broader issue of how far the mature access policy can be carried out without consideration of the part played by the public sector of third-level education

The initiative and other educational developments

- contributions by the initiative towards other HEA objectives e.g., modularisation, innovative teaching methods, gender equality, will come about indirectly, through the work of learning support and mediation by access and mature student officers, or through developments keyed in by teaching and learning units where they exist (paragraph 5.3)

Evaluation and data

- evaluation of outcomes and dissemination of results of the initiative are patchy. Quite a deal of information is available, but 'hard' data on key points are not always available in a consistent form. This is a point which needs addressing (paragraph 7.5)
- data on mature students are generally inadequate. Individual institutions may have data about the success rates of mature students or the numbers of part- and full-time students but in no universal form and some information is impressionistic.

Additional measures: institutional level

9.21 The contributions to be made by institutions to the achievement of the initiative might be as follows:

Academic commitment

- in some institutions understanding and acceptance of the policy are largely confined to senior management and a number of those already working with mature students: 'it is the middle that is of concern, the departmental and faculty heads level'. Some academics were said not to have concern for or experience of mature students, and the administrative system was not geared to providing registration, library and other systems for mature and part-time students (paragraphs 4.11 & 5.8)

Planning

- commitment and movement of norms at the centre of institutions are not evidently translated into a logical sequence of conceiving a policy that would convert general mission statements - where they existed - into a systematic sequence showing how they will become operational through target-setting, university organisation, admission arrangements, committed appointments, marketing, and teaching and learning offers. We did not note a conscious pursuit of such a sequence in most institutions, but the components of it were sometimes evident (paragraph 4.65)

Marketing, recruitment and admissions

- whilst many institutions devote time and resource to marketing courses to a wide variety of students, the possibilities of mature student access are not always known to potential applicants. A more vigorous nation-wide campaign through the media is thought necessary by many students we interviewed. But local, institutional, publicity is also needed (paragraphs 4.32, 4.35)
- institutional policies for the recruitment of a substantial proportion of part-time students are often not evident, and such achievements as existed in this area were not well publicised. We share the view of previous commentators that this will be the route to a major expansion of mature access
- institutions collectively, with central support, need to create a system of entry requirements and a credit transfer system that will enable work and other experience, successful attendance on preparatory courses, and attendance on third-level courses in other institutions to be taken into account when assessing applicants for entry. There is some demand for a national benchmarking system of preparatory courses and other forms of prior learning and experience (paragraph 4.51)

Student support

- whilst the initiative has shown the way to providing support for mature students through making possible the creation of units and posts, the primary responsibility for their care should rest on departments. We noted some movement in thinking about the nature of delivery necessary to attract and retain more mature students. It is less clear that universities and colleges are moving sufficiently from traditional educational styles and somewhat unresponsive tutorial modes to meet their needs (paragraph 5.7)

Staff development and evaluation

- staff development on the education of mature students is necessary. The tutorial function should figure seriously in any staff development schemes (paragraph 5.15)
- institutional evaluation of progress achieved through the initiative and otherwise is patchy and should become an intrinsic part of planning in this field. The indicators proposed in paragraph 9.26 below might provide a common form, enabling the HEA to build up a national picture of progress.

Additional measures: academic level

9.22 The contributions to be made at the academic level to the achievement of the initiative might be as follows:

- a high degree of academic autonomy is appropriate in higher education, but is not incompatible with the obligation to take seriously key social policies which can be pursued without detriment to their main academic pursuits, and which, in any case, may be essential to their survival as more traditional sources of student numbers decline. The departments hold the main relevant resources but there are reports of some weakness in departmental approaches
- in particular, the provision of tutorial and pastoral support, and the style of educational provision may need departmental and faculty review.

(ii) *consider other possible approaches to encouraging increased participation by mature students in the context of the tightening labour market (e.g., flexibility of provisions, part-time, open and distance learning, supports for students after entry) and to recommend how the initiative could be developed to assist these approaches*

9.23 Apart from part-time provision and support for students after entry, other approaches to encourage increased participation by mature students in the context of the tightening labour market will be needed. Open and distance learning may be used either as stand alone or as provision supplementary to education on campus. Joint work with employers in planning a full range of part-time courses at both the undergraduate and post-experience levels will be appropriate in some vocational areas.

(iii) *undertake a brief overview of initiatives undertaken in some other countries*

9.24 In our brief review of other European experience in this field (paragraphs 2.23 - 2.31) we could find no clear models of mature access and treatment upon which to base policy and practice. In fact, the targeted initiative puts Ireland ahead of most countries in respect of current attempts to build up mature student access.

(iv) *make recommendations on the conditions of funding of access courses (e.g., certification, progression)*

9.25 We were invited to make recommendations on funding of preparatory courses. We note that there is some body of opinion that these are best offered in further education institutions. They have, however, demonstrated that they can make a contribution not only to the advancement of individual mature students but to the attitudes and thinking in the university at large. We accordingly recommend that they should be expanded and made available for prospective part-time and distance students, perhaps in collaboration with other providers in the field. There is merit in encouraging both further and higher education institutions to offer preparatory courses in order to ensure that there is a range of provision that draws on the experience of both sectors. We consider that there should be encouragement of particularly those preparatory courses where successful students can secure guaranteed entry to the course linked to the programme. We propose that arrangements be put in place, along the lines of the targeted intake initiative, that would allow institutions to apply for funding for preparatory courses (paragraphs 4.36 - 4.37).

(v) *develop appropriate indicators*

9.26 It will be highly desirable for future policy purposes that institutions collect data in a nationally consistent form, and that they should run across the third-level system. Such data should enable institutions and the HEA to possess the following indicators:

Preparatory courses

- numbers enrolled
- numbers who successfully complete the course
- destinations of the students who have completed the course.

Third-level courses

- numbers by mode of study of those applying, accepted and registered, distinguishing between those with a school leaving certificate (or its equivalent) and those without and between those who attended a preparatory courses and those who did not
- the retention rates of mature students and details of class of award (distinguishing between the groups enumerated above)
- employment destinations for full-time mature students and, if possible, career patterns of the part-time students
- the above should be available at the level of the course and should include all students on credit bearing courses
- totals of the number of mature students taking non-credit bearing courses together with an estimate of their full-time equivalent
- numbers entering part-time, distance and full-time courses
- the progression rate to third-level institutions broken down between those entering through the CAO scheme with normal school leaving qualifications, and those entering through other qualifying schemes
- the retention rate of mature students in third-level courses broken down between those entering through the CAO scheme with normal school leaving qualifications, and those entering through other qualifying schemes
- the success rate of mature students in third-level courses broken down between those entering through the CAO scheme with normal school leaving qualifications, and those entering through other qualifying schemes
- the nature of employment secured.

General conclusions

9.27 The initiative has succeeded in raising consciousness of the mature access issue. 'It marks the area as being important', providing seed-corn funds enabling institutions to experiment fairly freely in ways of attracting and providing appropriately for mature students. It could not of itself shift the access proportion from 5% to 15%. It could, however, help set the policies, procedures and people in place to begin to approach that task.

9.28 It was believed in some institutions that the targeted initiative did not trigger off the mature student issue, that 'it hardly impinges ... although the HEA's impression is that it all began with them. A small bit of carrot without the realisation of requirements for Adult Education. Cornering a little bit of funds and offering in a competition, as if solving the problem'. By contrast, in another university it is believed 'the HEA initiative has made a huge difference to them; it has extended opportunities but has also provided the opportunity to look at the attitude and mindset of the university - it will be a long haul'.

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- 9.29 The initiative has attracted mature students to third-level work although the identifiable numbers in preparatory courses are relatively small. As important, it has put in place able and committed people in some institutions. We were impressed by the high level of professionalism, commitment and depth and width of educational and social perspective displayed by many of those responsible as course leaders, access officers and mature student officers whom we met. Where good activities were in train, they were getting strong support, too, from academic and administrative leadership. Without the initiative, preparatory courses would not be possible. The initiative has, therefore, given a strong impetus to good people. But the initiative will get lost if departments do not pick up the issues positively, and particularly make for flexibility in provision. At the same time, the drive to recruit many more part-time mature students will not succeed unless the financial position of many of them is relieved.
- 9.30 Earlier in the report we noted the arguments for a strong policy on mature access. The argument from equity has only partly been advanced by it inasmuch as our data show that most mature students have school leaving certificates, do not come from economically deprived groups. Some groups are helped e.g., women picking up from lack of opportunity earlier in life, which is deprivation of a particular kind, or pursuing an interest once their family situation makes it possible. Nor is it likely that many mature entrants will help solve shortages in the key skill areas. The third objective, of personal development and satisfaction, should certainly be met by the policy.

Best Practice Guidelines

- 9.31 We have been asked to suggest the components of a best practice guide – (vi) of the terms of reference. Our main points for future action are stated above. Our recommendations are necessarily not limited to the initiative, but cover the broader canvass of policy planning, student finance and educational approaches. What follows is an inventory of the sequence of actions, at different levels of the system, which need to be taken.

Best Practice Guidelines

Central Government

Strategic policy

1. adjusting policy against emerging social and economic criteria
2. combining strategic planning with encouragement of institutional initiatives
3. monitoring extent and nature of reservoir of potential mature applicants
4. establishing comprehensive data from institutions; review of definition of mature students
5. the demand for places should be continuously validated by market research on the target population to determine the extent of demand, the courses sought and the most appropriate method of provision (Review Committee)
6. collecting and dissemination of good practice through a central unit with a broad policy and evaluation function

Finance

7. consider reducing the differences faced by full and part-time students in respect of fees policy and financial support (including child-care costs)
8. tax relief better related to the position of mature students
9. review the funding methodology to allow funding of flexible study arrangements
10. continuation of initiative funding over a substantial period

Specific national policies

11. create a national course credit scheme and establish transfer system between institutions
12. standardisation of accreditation and access
13. more effective publicity at national level on openings for mature students
14. consideration to special form for mature student application
15. encourage universities to offer more flexible part-time third-level courses
16. fund a more comprehensive range of accredited preparatory courses
17. funding community based third-level courses in rural and remote communities to be set up by local interests
18. fund universities to provide preparatory courses. Others, e.g., VTOS, could provide at more basic level
19. fund staff training facilities on the concerns of mature students
20. encourage through special funding the development of mixed mode courses involving a combination of open learning materials and face-to face teaching
21. review the relationship between NDEC (Oscail) and Irish universities and colleges. NDEC and, where appropriate, other Irish institutions, should be encouraged to work in partnership with the OU and other distance education providers
22. statistics on mature students should include the figures for all major providers of part-time courses, such as the OU
23. support should be given for fees paid by distance education students on low incomes, including those courses offered by accredited providers from outside the state
24. the system should have more freedom to allow designated non-Irish education institutions to participate in targeted initiative schemes

The part to be played by institutions

25. systematically evaluate initiative-related activities
26. clarify institutional policy through Strategic Plans and Mission Statements. Place these intentions within a systematic sequence showing how they will become operational through target-setting, admission arrangements, committed appointments, marketing, teaching and learning offers, and organisation
27. establish an effective role structure with senior leadership for dealing with mature student issues
28. improve involvement of units and staff in issues concerning mature students
29. set proportion of entrants as firm target
30. give full support to units and staff concerned with educational, counselling and social support to students
31. give consideration to better child-care facilities for mature students with children
32. clarify and simplify admissions criteria and procedures
33. provide staff training directed to the concerns of mature students and new ways of learning
34. provide recognition to staff for time dedicated to courses in outlying areas
35. improve staffing ratios (perhaps made possible by reduced numbers of students) with the support of the HEA

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APPENDIX 1: ACTIVITIES FUNDED UNDER TARGETED INITIATIVE

In the following notes we briefly describe the institutions and their involvement in the targeted initiative based on their submissions to HEA.

University College Cork (UCC)

University College Cork (UCC) has over 13,000 students and an academic staff of over 1,700.

UCC's targeted initiative related expenditure received from the HEA over the last five years was as follows:

1996	£100,000
1997	£185,000
1998	£200,000
1999	£300,000
2000	£250,000

The following shows the targeted initiatives for which funding was sought and utilised in 1999/2000:

- careers advisory service for mature students
- disability equality training
- out-reach co-ordinators
- orientation programme for mature students
- tutor/adviser network for mature students
- regional community access network
- community anamateurs
- publication of course readers.

The proposed targeted initiative activities were 2000/2001:

In addition to the continuation of the above activities, funding was also received for the following activities in 2000/2001:

- travellers project: an apprenticeship training model
- research into non-participation by adult males
- multi-cultural educational programme
- community access network
- Northside/Southside Folklore and Ethnology project: an ongoing community employment and research project.

Dublin City University (DCU)

Dublin City University now has a population of over 7,500.

The targeted initiative expenditure figures have been:

1996	£10,000
1997	£140,000
1998	£50,000
1999	£80,000
2000	*

* money was carried over from 1999

Targeted Initiative Activities: 1999/2000:

- salary of Centre for Lifelong Learning co-ordinator
- general support of mature students, including helping the DCU mature student society
- provision of study skills support material
- design of a Certificate in Information, Media and the Internet
- attendance at the AONTAS Lifelong Learning Exhibition
- conduct of an Adult Learning survey
- contribution to the establishment of the North Dublin Learning Network
- contributing to the 'North Dublin Loves Learning Festival
- support of the New Opportunities for Women project in Ballymun
- brochures and promotion.

Proposed Targeted Initiative Activities: 2000/2001:

- salary of Centre for Lifelong Learning co-ordinator
- further study skill support
- planning of a resource and information centre
- planning the involvement of mature students in the Student Peer-Mentoring programme
- planning the establishment of a mature studentship scheme to be funded by public/private sources
- attendance at the AONTAS Lifelong Learning Exhibition
- contribution to the North Dublin Learning Network
- examination of more flexible approaches to admissions
- establishment of a mature studentship scheme.

National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG)

The National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) student body (part-time, full-time) during the 1999/00 academic year was over 12,000. It has seven Faculties, including a medical school.

Its initiative related expenditures have been:

1996	-
1997	£84,000
1998	£100,000
1999	£300,000
2000	£325,000

Its main activities up to 1999 have been:

- appointment of mature students officer
- development of a science, mathematics and Technology Foundation Course
- appointment of a Community Education Officer and Out-reach Officers
- development of courses; work with local communities; development of an accreditation framework; development of access courses.

Its proposed 2000 activities have been:

- continuation of existing activities
- new modular degree in Ennis and Sligo
- post entry support for access students
- development of internal capacity in the accreditation of prior/experiential learning, further work with disadvantaged schools, communities and refugees.

Trinity College Dublin (TCD)

Trinity College Dublin's student enrolment is 14,750 (1999/00). It has stated commitments to ensuring a significant increase in participation of those who have not had the opportunity to avail themselves of third-level education.

Initiative funded expenditure

Its initiative funded expenditure is as follows (but it finds 50% of the funds expended on the initiative itself)

Mature Allocation: Foundation Course and Mature Student Officer

1996	£90,000
1997	£90,000
1998	£100,000
1999	£130,000
2000	£121,000

Initiative related activities up to 1999 were:

- foundation course and related activities for mature students from disadvantaged circumstances
- appointment of a mature students officer
- induction programme for mature students
- researching the needs of mature students
- mature student support service.

Proposed 2000 activities were:

In 2000, there will be a continuation of existing activities. They have applied for the following funds for Mature Student initiatives.

Foundation Course for Higher Education Mature Students: June 2001-2002 Projected costs £142,750
 Mature Student Officer: Projected costs £66,900.

University College Dublin (UCD)

University College Dublin has over 18,000 registered undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Its initiative funded expenditure is as follows:

1996	£50,000
1997	£120,000
1998	£150,000
1999	£250,000
2000	£270,000

Targeted Initiative Activities: 1999/2000

Development Officer		£27,000 (incl. employer's costs)
Administrative Assistant		£13,000 (incl. employer's costs)
Anti-Racism Consultancy		£6,000
New Course Development	£3,000	
Staff Supervision		£2,000
5-year Development Plan		£2,500
Programme Delivery Costs		£56,500
Student Support Services		£6,000
Tutor Training/Support		£6,000
Access Education Forum		£3,320
Annual conference		£5,800
Research		£5,000
Promotional/Development Activities		£6,000
30% Overheads		£41,886
TOTAL COSTS		£181,506

Of the above expenditure, £55,000 was provided under the targeted initiative; the balance was funded by a number of different sources.

As part of the Mature Students Out-reach Project:

- appointment of an admissions co-ordinator for transfer and mature students
- co-ordinating courses at out-reach centres
- needs analysis and course development
- networking with community and public organisations and employers
- advertising out-reach courses
- production of a brochure.

As part of the Tutor Development Project:

- salary of project officer
- development of a Certificate in adult Education
- tutor training
- production of a tutors' handbook
- the preparation of research and policy papers.

Proposed Targeted Initiative Activities: 2000/2001

As part of the WERRC programme for mature and disadvantaged students:

Total Funding Sought: Grant Allocation Period 2000/2001

Development Officer	£29,500
Administrative Assistant	£16,000
Education Officer	£32,500
Programme Sustainability	£68,217
New Programmes	£57,000
New IT Programme Delivery	£60,000
Staff and Student Support	£15,000
Networking and Liaison	£12,000
Total	£290,217

As part of the Tutor Development Project:

- salary of project officer
- course development (adult literacy)
- expansion of the certificate in adult education
- induction programme for new tutors
- purchase of resource materials.

Other proposals:

- development of a Science Foundation Course.

Mary Immaculate College Limerick (MIC)

Mary Immaculate College's (MIC) programmes are accredited by the University of Limerick. It has about 2,000 students in 11 departments. It has some part-time undergraduate and Masters and Diploma students.

The College received £140,000 from the HEA this year for the Targeted Initiative. It has only been funded since 1998-99 and used the money to develop support services of the Learner Support Unit. Its expenditure on the initiative has been:

1996	-
1997	£10,000*
1998	£20,000
1999	£45,000
2000	£89,000

* VTOS money, not HEA

Its initiative related activities up to 1999 have been:

- establishment of a Learner Support unit
- of an orientation course
- provision of study skills support
- advancing links with community groups.

The activities proposed for 2000 were:

- continuation of existing activities
- development of on-line support facility
- development of an access pathway
- external evaluation of activities.

St Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin (SPD)

St Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra, Dublin (SPD) became a college of Dublin City University (DCU) in 1993. It has 1700 students (undergraduates and postgraduates). A BA in Humanities was introduced in 1993. A decision was made at the time to reserve up to 30% of places on the BA for mature students.

The funding sought in 2000 was £35,000 and the break down is as follows:

- part-time co-ordinator and secretarial support: £20,000
- specialist writing tutor: £5,000
- publications and web page design: £1,000
- staff development in adult education: £2,000
- analysis of existing data on student performance based on selection criteria: £4,000
- funding for continuation of initiatives begun in 1999: £3,000.

The following activities were also undertaken by existing staff:

- study workshops
- exam clinics
- personal tutor system.

Funding from central college resources:

- research graduate: £4,000
- course development and administration (existing budget).

Initiative related expenditure was:

1996	-
1997	£25,000
1998	£20,000
1999	-
2000	£30,000

Initiative related activities up to 1999 were:

- establishment of a Unit for Adult and Continuing Education
- support work with local communities
- provision of informational materials.

Proposals for 2000 were:

- continuation of existing activities
- development of specialist Irish course
- development of an access course for mature students.
- development of a modular BA
- liaison with Area Based partnerships
- liaison with local Communities in collaboration with the Unit for Disadvantaged Students
- liaison with other groups such as prisoners, refugees, VTOS and Access students
- evaluation of the selection method for mature applicants
- design of Information brochure for mature students
- design of web site for mature students and applicants
- establishment of specialist advisory service
- establishment of student mentor system with mature graduates of the College
- organisation of courses on "The Adult Learner" for academic staff
- co-ordination of research tracking our mature students and graduates
- development of special option on the MEd on Adult Education
- improvement of recreational, IT, crèche and library facilities.

University of Limerick (UL)

The University of Limerick (UL) has an enrolment of 9000 students and is comprised of six colleges.

Initiative related expenditure was:

1996	-
1997	£63,000
1998	£20,000
1999	£30,000
2000	£130,000

Initiative related activities up to 1999 were:

- delivery of Foundation Course in Science and Technology
- preparatory work on progression and accreditation
- mature students advisory and mentoring service.

Proposed 2000 activities were:

- development of top-up modules in mathematics, computing and study skills
- appointment of a guidance counsellor
- new course development
- further offering of the Science and Technology Foundation Course.

National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM)

National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM) has some 5,000 students of whom one-fifth are registered for postgraduate courses and degrees.

Initiative related expenditure was:

1996	-
1997	£75,000
1998	-
1999	£100,000
2000	£150,000

The amount spent by the university on programmes was considerably in excess of the targeted funding granted by the HEA.

Initiative related activities up to 1999 were:

- project to evaluate support systems for mature students
- out-reach development at Kilkenny involving a modular BA course
- salary of the Mature Student Officer concerned with all stages of promotion, selection, induction and mentoring as well as the development of the Mature Student Handbook.

Proposed 2000/01 activities were:

- continuation funding for BA Modular part-time programme.
 - development funding for NUI Certificate in Science.
-

APPENDIX 2: LIST OF PEOPLE MET

University College Cork (UCC)

Professor Aine Hyland, Vice-President, UCC (and Chair of the Commission on the Points System)
Anne Mills, Admissions Officer
Professor Aidan Moran, Registrar and Vice-President for Academic Affairs
Professor Martin O’Fathaigh, Director, Centre for Adult Continuing Education
Professor Fred Powell, Head of Department of Applied Social Studies
Dr Garret Thomas, Department of Applied Mathematics (and Chairman of Committee for Non-Standard Entrants to the Faculty of Science)
Professor Peter Woodman, Dean, Faculty of Arts

Dublin City University (DCU)

Dr Marann Byrne, Programme Director, BA Accounting and Finance
Dr Barry McMullin, Dean of Teaching and Learning
Martin Molony, Programme Director, BA Communication Studies
Professor Tony Moynihan, Former Programme Director, Computer Applications Degree
Dr Gary Murphy, Programme Director, Bachelor of Business Studies
Paul Sheehan, Director of Library Services

National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG)

Professor Iognáid G Ó Muircheartaigh, President
Professor Ruth Curtis, Vice-President for Development & External Affairs and Associate Professor of Psychology
Dr Margaret Hodgins, Director of Social Care Programme, Department of Health Promotion
Mary Liddy, Mature Students Officer
Dr Seamus Mac Mathúna, Secretary for Academic Affairs
Professor John Marshall, Dean of Arts and Associate Professor of Education
Professor Hubert McDermott, Associate Professor of English
Seamus O’Grady, Director of Adult & Continuing Education
Professor James J Ward, Vice-President for Human & Physical Resources and Professor of Marketing

University of Limerick (UL)

Dr Roger Downer, President
Jacinta Cuneen, Lecturer/Formal Mature Student
Paula Fitzell, Access Officer
Anne Keene, Head, Technical Writing, Technical Communications, Department of Languages and Cultural Studies
Dr John Logan, Senior Lecturer in History
Frank McCourty, Course Director, Equine Science/Director, Science Teacher Education
Patricia Anne Moore, Manager, Department of Life Long Learning
Dr Sarah Moore, Dean, Teaching and Learning
Dr John O’Brien, Associate Vice President, Academic Services
Fionnuala Sheehan, Deputy Registrar
Finbarr (Barry) Sharkey, Admissions Officer
Dr Siobhan Tiernan, Lecturer, Department of Management and Marketing

National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM)

Angela Lucas, Liaison Officer, Department of English
Angela McGinn, Mature Students’ Officer
John McGinnity, Admissions Officer

Ann O'Brien, Access Officer
Ann O'Shea, Records
Mary Ryan, Adult Education Department
Dr Richard Watson, Dean of Arts

Trinity College Dublin (TCD)

Irena Boydell, Co-ordinator, Foundation Course for Higher Education: Mature Students
Patricia Callaghan, Assistant Academic Secretary/Admissions Officer
Professor PJ Drudy, Director, Centre for Educational Access and Community Development
Maureen Dunne, Mature Students Officer✕
Cliona Hannon, Co-ordinator, Trinity Access Programme (TAP)
Dr Ray Fuller, Psychology Department, TAP Steering Committee member
Professor Michael Laver, Senior Lecturer
Professor John Scattergood, Dean of Arts (Letters)

University College Dublin (UCD)

Professor Patrick Clancy, Dean of Philosophy and Sociology
Professor Fergus D'Arcy, Dean of Arts
Anne Drummond, Centre for Safety and Health at Work
Barbara Fleming, Co-ordinator, Mature Students and Access, Adult Education Department
Professor Alan Harrison, Part-time BA Modular Arts Degree
Dr Caroline Hussey, Registrar
Jean Keating, Mature Students' Officer
Professor Joe Mannion, Dean of Agriculture
Ailbhe Smyth, Director of Women's Education Research and Resource Centre (and former member of HEA Board)
Martin Walters, Head of Adult Education Department

Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MIC)

Dr Peadar Cremin, President of the College
Geraldine Brosnan, Adult Learner Support Counsellor
Dr John Hayes, Co-ordinating Head, Arts Departments
Anne O'Keeffe, Director, Learning Support Unit/Academic in Applied Linguistics
Dr Sylvia O'Sullivan, Director, Adult and Continuing Education
Dr Deirdre Reddington, Academic in English Department
Eugene Wall, Registrar and Lecturer in Educational Psychology

St. Patrick's College of Education, Drumcondra (SPD)

Dr Pauric Travers, President

Dr Brenna Clarke, Convenor of Mature Students' Committee/Academic in English

Cora Cregan, Adult and Continuing Education Officer/Careers Officer

Dr Hugh Gash, Academic in Education Department/Involved in selection of mature students for BEd degree

Tom Halpin, Academic in English Department/Involved in selection of mature students for BA degree

Dr Liam MacMathúna, Registrar

Therese Savage, Admissions Office

Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), Galway

Dr Bernard O'Hara, Acting Registrar

National Distance Education Centre (Oscail)

Dr Dennis Bancroft, Director

Central Applications Office (CAO), Galway

Mr John McAvoy, General Manager

Dr Martin Newell, Secretary

Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU), Dublin

Michael McGrath, Director

APPENDIX 3: EXAMPLES OF SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRES

HEA MATURE STUDENTS

The replies on this questionnaire will be confidential to the research team; no individual reply will be identifiable in any published report.

Questionnaire - Successful mature applicants

Section A

The questions in this section of the questionnaire are about you and your background before joining the course.

A1	Are you	Male/Female
A2	In what year were you born?	
A3	In what year did you leave school?	
A4	Please summarise your work experience (if any) between leaving school and joining your present course	
A5	Please list any academic, technical or professional qualifications you held prior to joining your present course	
A6	Attached to this questionnaire is a list of occupations; please indicate below which of the occupational groups best describes	
	Your father's current or most recent occupation	
	Your mother's current or most recent occupation	
	Your most recent full-time occupation	
A7	Please state the town/city and county where you normally live	
	In what town/city and county do you live in term time, if different?	

A8	Please indicate your country of citizenship	
	a) Republic of Ireland <input type="checkbox"/> b) UK <input type="checkbox"/> c) Other European Union Country <input type="checkbox"/> d) Other Country <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Were you born in the Republic of Ireland?	Yes/No
	If no please state your country of birth	

A9	Please indicate your ethnicity by ticking the appropriate box	
	a) White Irish <input type="checkbox"/> b) White European <input type="checkbox"/> c) White Other <input type="checkbox"/> d) Black Irish <input type="checkbox"/> e) Black European <input type="checkbox"/> f) Black Other <input type="checkbox"/> g) Asian Irish <input type="checkbox"/> h) Asian Other <input type="checkbox"/> i) Other Ethnicity <input type="checkbox"/>	

A10	Are you registered disabled?	Yes/No
	If no, do you have any disabilities that may affect your studies?	Yes/No
	Please indicate the nature of any relevant disabilities	

A11	Do you have responsibilities as a carer?	Yes/No
	If yes, please state the ages of those for whom you have caring responsibilities.	

Section B

This section is concerned with the reasons why you did not enter higher education upon leaving school and the circumstances surrounding your decision to enter higher education as a mature student.

B1	Why did you decide to return to education?		
	In the first column tick all the reasons relevant to your course, and in the second tick only one - the most important reason.		
	a) To advance my present career <input type="checkbox"/> b) To enable a change in career <input type="checkbox"/> c) To reduce the chance of being unemployed <input type="checkbox"/> d) To pursue an interest in academic study <input type="checkbox"/> e) For personal development <input type="checkbox"/> f) To help gain employment <input type="checkbox"/> g) Other – please specify <input type="checkbox"/>	All relevant reasons <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Most important reason <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

B2	Did you complete your Leaving Certificate (or equivalent higher education entry qualification)?	Yes/No
	If appropriate, please specify your equivalent qualification	If you answered yes, go to question B4

B3	Why did you leave school without taking your Leaving Certificate?		
	In the first column tick all the appropriate reasons, and in the second tick only one - the most important reason.	All appropriate reasons	Most important reason
	a) Inability to cope with the academic level of the work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	b) Wanted/had to earn money	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	c) Bored with school work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	d) Wanted to leave home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	e) Poor school education	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	f) Other – please specify	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		

B4	Why did you decide not to start a third level course immediately after, or soon after, leaving school?		
	In the first column tick all the appropriate reasons, and in the second tick only one - the most important reason.	All appropriate reasons	Most important reason
	a) Wanted/had to earn money	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	b) Saw more exciting possibilities outside education	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	c) Bored with academic life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	d) Failed to be accepted on the course of my choice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	e) Could not find a course I wanted to take	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	f) Took a job which seemed to offer better prospects	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	g) Undertook further training (such as an apprenticeship) outside the higher education system	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	h) Wanted to leave home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	i) Wanted to travel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	j) Had to look after others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	k) Started a course but left	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	l) Started a course which I failed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	m) Other – please specify	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

B5	Did you take a special course to help you prepare for entry to higher education?	Yes/No
		<i>If no, go to question B7</i>

B6	Please indicate all the courses you took in preparation for entry to your present course.	
	a) Access course at present institution	<input type="checkbox"/>
	b) Foundation or return to learning course at present institution	<input type="checkbox"/>
	c) Access course at another institution – please specify	<input type="checkbox"/>
	
	d) Foundation or return to learning course at another institution – please specify	<input type="checkbox"/>
	
	e) Post leaving certificate course	<input type="checkbox"/>
	f) VTOS course	<input type="checkbox"/>
	g) University certificate course	<input type="checkbox"/>
	h) Other course – please specify	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>

B7	What, if any, were the major barriers you had to overcome in becoming a mature student. In the first column tick all significant barriers and in the second tick only one - the most significant barrier.		
		All significant	Most significant
	a) Lack of finance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	b) Lack of confidence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	c) Inadequate academic preparation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	d) Lack of knowledge of available opportunities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	e) Need to care for children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	f) Need to care for other dependants	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	g) Lack of support of partner or close family member	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	h) Travel distance from home to institution	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	i) Need to overcome a physical or mental disability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	j) Other – please specify	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
		

B8	Why did you choose your present course?	
	Select only one of the statements below – the one that, for you, is the most important reason.	
	a) Career reasons	<input type="checkbox"/>
	b) Interest in the subject matter	<input type="checkbox"/>
	c) Career and interest both of great importance	<input type="checkbox"/>
	d) Other – please specify	<input type="checkbox"/>
	
	

B9	Is your present course the one you would most like to have done?	Yes/No
		<i>If yes go to question C1</i>

B10	Why did you not take your preferred course?	
	a) Applied but not accepted	<input type="checkbox"/>
	b) Impossible or inconvenient travel arrangements	<input type="checkbox"/>
	c) The times at which the course was offered were not convenient	<input type="checkbox"/>
	d) Other – please specify	<input type="checkbox"/>
	
	

Section C

In this section we ask questions about the course you are on and how you learnt about it.

C1	Name of institution at which you studying	
	What course are you studying?	
	What qualification you are aiming for?	
	Is your course full or part-time?	Full-time/Part-time