ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

Ted Fleming, Andrew Loxley and Fergal Finnegan

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List of Abbreviations

CAO	Central Applications Office
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EC	European Commission
FET	Further Education and Training
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEI	Higher Education Institute
IG	Irish Government
IoT	Institute of Technology
NOEAHE	National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RANLHE	Retention and Access of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education
SEN	School of Education University of Northampton
T&L	Teaching and Learning
WP	Widening Participation

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Ted Fleming, Andrew Loxley, and Fergal Finnegan

Access and the Idea of the University

Over the past 20 years, access has moved from the margins to centre stage in higher education (HE) in the Republic of Ireland. We have seen a steady stream of policy statements and reviews on the topic of access from the state and the Higher Education Authority (the body which directs and funds the sector), a growing body of research on widening participation (WP) and on a more local level the mushrooming of access programmes in universities and in community and further education. All this effort and creativity has added a new and intriguing layer to the "idea of the university". Alongside the traditional goals of teaching and knowledge creation and the less traditional, but very central goal of contributing to economic growth, we now have access and WP. This has become a familiar idea but the aspiration to open up third-level education to social groups that have been previously excluded from HE, such as mature adults, people from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds and people with disabilities, is in historical terms a very new proposal which reflects significant changes in culture and politics and the place of education in modern economies.

Access has become an integral part of how HE understands itself and how it explains the value of what it does for society as a whole. Improving access to education, it is contended, strengthens social cohesion, lessens inequality, guarantees the future vitality of tertiary

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institutions and ensures economic competitiveness and flexibility in the era of the "knowledge-based economy" (KBE). These heady hopes and bold claims reflect a deep and in some sense an extraordinary faith amongst policymakers and the Irish population more generally in the power of education to effect progressive change. Access in this sense is part of a much larger narrative – and one we want to claim is central to Irish society – about the importance of education in creating a fair and truly modern society.

Despite this to date, there has been no book-length study of access and WP in Ireland. There is a good deal of relevant work in policy and research to draw upon, but there has been no extended piece of work concerned with the impact and significance of access upon Irish HE.[1] This book fills this gap and critically explores the topic by tracing the emergence and development of access within HE and situating this within a broader socio-historical and political context and through a detailed thematic and conceptual analysis of Irish access policy; a complete review of the empirical research on access; a mapping of the core themes and some of the gaps in the existing academic literature on this topic; and exploring through the lens of critical theory the limits and possibilities of access. This book offers an account of the forces and actors driving the "access agenda" and explores the implications of this in relation to policy, research and pedagogy in HE. By doing so, we want to ensure that the people at the heart of the story, non-traditional students, are kept firmly in view. The structure of the book reflects this and the middle section is dedicated to exploring what we know about and what remains unknown or under researched in relation to these groups of students. Taking students as a key reference point opens up valuable space for critical discussion about the meaning of HE and its wider societal goals. As part of this effort to keep students at the centre of access, the text contextualises, problematises and interrogates the development of access categories and the way we currently understand access through "target groups".

Access is best understood as one part of a wider range of policy initiatives and interventions designed to redress underrepresentation and inequality in society as a whole. It is linked to egalitarian and democratic hopes and projects. We do not underestimate the positive effect this has had on HE and Irish society. New pedagogies and practices have emerged, and there has been a great deal of sectoral diversification and development. New types of students have entered Irish HE – most notably students with disabilities and mature students – and access initiatives have had success.

Yet as we discuss in this book, the progress has been patchier and slower than policymakers hoped. Enduring and deeply embedded inequalities in participation throw up a number of knotty questions about the relationship between the economy, the state and education that call for an extensive and considered analysis. Access begs very important questions about how we imagine our society progressing. This book sets out to peel back the layers of this access narrative and peer into the policies and the practical realities of access to HE.

Education and Economic Modernisation

In order to frame the story of access accurately, we have to step back and say something about how HE has changed more generally and how this is linked to wider social trends. Within two generations, a tiny, elite, HE system has been transformed into a "mass" system with a comparatively high rate of public participation. Our dynamic HE system is a source of a great deal of pride in Ireland and positive references to education and our young highly educated population abound in media and everyday life. This is commonly understood as part of Ireland becoming "properly" modern. But the truth about the education system and indeed the process of modernisation is more complicated and has its shadows. The purpose of this book is to offer a more dialectical account of the relationship between HE and Irish public policies. HE and indeed access can point to achievements but there are very real, well-documented, limits to access and WP in tackling inequalities. A blithe faith in modernisation, tightly bound to a liberal and linear conception of history, may be very commonplace in contemporary educational policy but as the book will explain the empirical evidence invites scepticism of such claims.

However, this narrative of modernisation has deep roots in social and educational policy. As Chap. 2 outlines, it can be traced back to the Lemass government (1959–1966) which launched two National Programmes for Economic Expansion (Irish Government 1958, 1963). As part of this modernisation and economic liberalisation, a succession of innovations in education was embarked upon in the 1960s including free secondary education (1967) and free school transport (1969). A second tier of HE was introduced in the form of Regional Technical Colleges (announced in 1963), and *Investment in Education* (IG 1965) was by far the most significant policy report of that era and arguably established the

paradigm with which we are still working. This report firmly linked modernisation and economic development with education.

This was part of an attempt to open up the Irish economy to international foreign direct investment. A largely agricultural economy which was highly dependent on exports to the UK was catapulted into "late industrialisation" (Whelan and Layte 2004). Regardless of the fact that this term is somewhat misleading given that Ireland has gone through several cycles of industrialisation and deindustrialisation of cities and regions over the past 200 years (O'Connor 2011; Bieldenberg 2010), the phrase does at least alert us to the scale and novelty of the change that followed these reforms from the 1960s onwards. Increased flows of foreign direct investment and new forms of statecraft did transform the economy and the labour market, education and Irish culture.

Since the 1960s this particular form of economic development, however unevenly, has progressed in waves. Multinationals have considerable sway in the Irish economy: pharmaceuticals, information technology (manufacturing and software development) and finance have become leading sectors in terms of GDP and the social imagination (McCabe 2011; O'Hearn 1998; O'Riain 2000).[2] Many small and medium enterprises, professions and infrastructural developments depend on foreign direct investment. Unsurprisingly, this has also led to a change in the composition of and the leading ideas held by the Irish elite who have become both more global in outlook and far more sensitive to the needs of international business. Favourable tax breaks, light touch regulation, an educated work force and easy access to a European Union (EU) market from an English-speaking base have all played a role in this transformation. This required a "compliant state"[3] to encourage investment, but one is also strong enough to fund and manage the stresses and strains of a society in transformation.

Of course, part of this remit involves the education system – including HE – that would supply skilled workers for a growing economy. This economistic and utilitarian orientation is deeply embedded in Irish society and policy, but it is also visionary and idealistic, wedded to this belief in the efficacy of the market to bring growth, social cohesion and even equality. This has a strong international dimension, and the peculiar and rapid transformation in education and society has been observed, supported and nudged by transnational bodies, especially the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU). The OECD was founded in 1961 and made its first major mark just 2 years later (Walsh et al. 2014). Ireland appears to have been a

laboratory for the testing of their policies, as it was a willing respondent to the guidance of the OECD.

Similarly, Irish educational policy is tightly bound to the EU's conception of lifelong learning and the enhancement of "human capital" in a knowledge-based economy. It is difficult to overstate the influence these international bodies have had. In this sense, Ireland is an interesting case study of a small, peripheral highly open and globalised economy which is part of a much larger project thinking about and imaging the role of non-compulsory education in relation to work and society envisaged by the EU and the OECD.

The Irish HE system is organised around a binary divide between the universities and the Institutes of Technology (IoT), which is a significant contextual factor when discussing not only about access and WP, but also about the orientations and foci of higher education institutions (HEIs) more generally. Until the early 1970s, the system comprised five small universities (expanding to seven in 1989) with a total enrolment of 18,500 students or 6 per cent of the relevant age-cohort (DES 1972) and drew, unsurprisingly, from the higher social classes (Clancy 1982). Despite the two sectors having similar number of academic staff and undergraduate students, there are marked structural and cultural differences which in a number of respects, put them into different HE "spaces" from one another. Part of this is of course historical, but it is political as well (see Walsh et al. 2014; Loxley 2014; Walsh and Loxley 2015). The universities have a strong research orientation, which is not a significant feature of the IoTs. In annual funding, the universities account for 83 per cent of all research money, employed 82 per cent of all contract researchers, generated 94 per cent (or 74,007) of publications since 1998, 84 per cent of all academic staff have doctorates (as opposed to 26 per cent in the IoTs) and account for 79 per cent (or 26,486) of all postgraduate students (Loxley et al. 2016b). Undergraduate programmes are also different in a number of respects, with the IoTs not only working within their "professional and technical remit" (with a small sprinkling of the humanities), but also offer NFQ Level 6 and Level 7 programmes, whereas these are rarely found in the universities. The Central Applications Office (CAO) points required for entry to what are equivalent Level 8 programmes are also different, with the universities being more demanding. Most of the IoTs are also quite small institutions (circa 5,000 students in comparison to 14,000 for the universities) and work in communities which are either sparsely populated and/or areas not traditionally known for HE provision or

easy physical access to HE. This latter characteristic runs counter to the current emphasis on sector rationalisation (HEA 2012b), despite a long held recognition of the need for a coherent national spatial strategy in order to manage an imbalance in population distributions around Ireland (IG 2010). It is also important to note that there is no political desire to create a unified system as per for example the UK. Indeed, the highly influential 2004 OECD report advocated for its retention, and amongst other things, the IoTs should not focus their attention on research except in a localised and applied manner. In particular, the report was against IoTs engaging in doctoral education. Even more telling was the report's description of the IoTs being "on the front line of the widening participation agenda and will be key players in this in future years. They have higher proportions of local students and attract far more students from less advantaged socio-economic groups than the universities" (OECD 2004, p. 32). The semiotics of this is writ large and we shall come back to it later. But in simple terms, access and WP are "implemented" within a system which is highly differentiated and stratified.

The Stakes of the Game: Prosperity, Justice and an Anxious Question

Access then is linked to discourses of modernisation, economic development and social justice. Lifelong learning and human capital "optimisation" are the most enduring and seductive versions of this approach in education sector. This has encouraged cultural and structural shifts in attitudes to learning and education and to kinds of learning that are deemed useful for the global knowledge economy. Social justice is also perceived as a product and the likely, even necessary, result of economic development. Sean Lemass asserted in the Dáil directly quoting President Kennedy: "A rising tide lifts all the boats" (Dáil Debates 1964). In the same days, the opposition in the Dáil called attention to the "rising tide of emigration"!

Barriers to Access

One of the most enduring concepts in the access story is that of barrier. There are barriers to access, barriers to WP, barriers to learning, barriers to finance and barriers to childcare. This is a useful concept at two levels. It gives an accurate understanding of the nature of the obstacles faced by

students and of institutional rigidities. Secondly, it gives a sense of achievement to all (including institutions) who can surmount barriers and celebrate successes. Some barriers are institutional; others are social, economic and cultural. The access agenda involves addressing these barriers and each intervention addresses one or more of these barriers. However, just as a metaphor can illuminate, it can also hide important realities. In this case, one barrier is dominant. We name this as inequality and poverty. These inequalities are foundational and at a different level to others.

Impediments to participation or "barriers", as they are commonly referred to across the literature, were seen to be a polygonal mix of the cultural (e.g. value orientations towards HE as well as within HE), as well as the structural (e.g. financial, organisational, geographical and so on). However, it is also important to note that this demographic asymmetry in terms of participation was not confined to Ireland. Rather it seemed to be a phenomena replicated across Europe (see Woodrow's 1996 "Access to higher education in European" project report),[4] the US, Australia (Gale and Tranter 2011; Gale 2015) at roughly the same time. Internationally, the pursuit of expansionist agendas seemed to run up against similar problems in relation to broadening participation amongst non-traditional groups. What appears to have occurred at this point in time, is a high degree of policy convergence (Bleiklie 2005; Kyvik 2004), but nonetheless played out in their respective socio-political contexts and driven by a similar mix of motives, influences and rationalisations.

We also ask whether the concept of barrier is a sufficient metaphor. As we examine each barrier, it also at the same time acts like a prism that refracts and breaks light into its component parts (wavelengths). Light enters a prism at one point and emerges at the other face at different points depending on wavelength. Blue light emerges at a different point to red. Barriers also refract. Each barrier segments, separates and refracts students too. Even if finance is given to a student in grants, they will not emerge at the same point as those who arrive together at the access point with financial security. Even the equal opportunity debate allows (or tries to allow) all to enter HE at the same point, but of necessity, each moves along a different path within HE. Inequality, poverty and social class are the big issues of the access story and are enduring realities for many students.

One simple question suggests itself (though the answer may not be simple): to what is access given? Once HE is seen as a binary system with access to different qualifications, disciplines and careers, one can immediately see that HE segments students into academic and vocational careers and

when increased access is given to HE, the access is to segmented and stratified disciplines and careers. Within HE, some students have access to a wide range of disciplines and vocations, while others are on an access route to a more limited range of departments, disciplines and careers. Students on access routes are competing for a small number of places in a narrow range of disciplines. Mass HE has arrived for some and elite HE remains in place for others.

Crisis and Complexity

The Great Recession has put these questions about enduring inequalities, how we make sense of them through narratives and metaphors, and the precise role of HE in society into sharp relief. After 7 years of austerity, HE is overstretched and understaffed as this will be discussed in the next chapter. There has also been a rethink of some of the more optimistic projections for increased participation (the aim is 72 per cent for 2020) (HEA 2008a, p. 5). There is a major review of funding, a reintroduction of tuition fees, a wholesale reform of adult and further education and far more pointed emphasis on outcomes, key performance indicators, a wide range of metrics and employability. Access is in a very significant way being recast as access to employability and for the first time in two decades, serious questions are being raised about the value of expansion. A meaningless word "overeducation" has begun to be bandied about. This is a significant shift and part of the intensification of neoliberal logic in Irish society.

However, in noting the intensification of market logic and the consequences of austerity, we do not want to conjure up a "university in ruins" (Readings 1996). First, HE is a very complex set of institutions deeply embedded in society, however divided they might be. Enacting policy aimed at major change – be that neoliberal or egalitarian – is not a straightforward or linear process. HEIs are sedimented with history and are maintained, sustained and changed through the agency of powerful actors at the centre of the system and, less visibly, by dissidence at the margins. On one level:

> The university can be understood as the intermingling of narratives of itself that have been laid down over time. The strata that form the narratives are not neatly layered on each other: they are like rock formations, the separate strata being visible and also running into each other, with old strata reaching up into the new. (Barnett 2011, p. 73)

Or maybe the more accurate metaphor is magmas, which suggests movement, structure and complexity. The part of our aim here is to hold on to this complexity and to ask how the old and the new, the solid and the fluid, the residual and the emergent become meshed together when exploring access policy in HE.

In the 1990s, addressing this situation of underrepresentation, a wholesale laissez faire approach by the Irish state was not possible. Market discipline in the context of HE has historically been used in a selective manner designed to suit specific policy objectives, rather than applied as a grand organising principle or ideological axiom around which all policy interventions are built. The legacy of the social partnership model (though now largely abandoned) and the Irish political landscape did not lend itself to the founding of a Hayekian-Friedman paradise. If anything, the system functions as a hybrid between a form of network governance[5] and a neo-Weberian bureau-professional framework (see Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011; Walsh and Loxley 2015). Whilst neoliberal rhetoric about competition, market discipline, labour and organisational flexibility, outcome-based performativity have been woven into much policy discourse, it is far from a complete or finished process.

Higher education remains a space of contestation in which the belief in academic freedom, notions of equality, conceptions of education and even traditional liberal values are frequently at odds with neoliberal managerial reform. By saying this, we also want to avoid nostalgia for the university that never was. There is no golden era in the past when universities were unequivocally liberal and wonderful and they have been closed and elitist institutions. Just 100 years ago, Thorstein Veblen (1918) published his savage attacks on how the heavy hand of business was stifling universities in America. In the same way, we can assume that there is no panacea for the future either.

From a historical perspective (Archer 1979; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), there can be little doubt that the elite and the burgeoning middle classes have managed to shape the new "mass" educational system according to their own needs, interests and values. This can be discerned in the institutional systems, practices and main philosophies which inform HE today. However, noting this should not lead one to be overly reductive about this historical process; the formation of the modern education system is a complicated story in which classes, and class fractions, collaborated and struggled against each other to articulate a vision of culture and society using a wide variety of registers and rationales (Williams 1961).

The Pulse of Freedom

There is a particularly rich line of critical theory (Honneth 2014) and other forms of radical social inquiry (Williams 1961) that remind us that there has been an insistent push to democratise everyday life in and through education. However, dim things may appear in the twilight of neoliberalism; it is important to bear in mind that access, however indirectly, reflects the spread of egalitarian and democratic ideas into previously elite-only spaces.

This gives any discussion of access a certain “doubleness”. Peter Alheit (2005)[6] captures this well in his description of the expansion of education as part of historical compromise which was based on:

> a somewhat unusual alliance between social-democratic reformism and capital’s drive to modernize both itself and society. What one side envisaged as an emancipatory opportunity for personal growth, especially for the working classes, was seen by the other side as the benefits of having the wide-ranging skills that were considered essential to remain competitive. (Alheit 2005, p. 391)

Higher education is a highly storied, powerfully symbolic cultural space, which is directly linked to processes of social reproduction and capital accumulation, but also, at least at the edges, creates space for democracy, citizenship and personal development. In discussing access in policy and practice, the challenge is not to lose the opportunities that are undoubtedly available for many more students to learn and enhance their own development and make a contribution to their families and society. So in pulling back the layers of this success story of access, we find ourselves confronting questions about myths of progress and modernisation in a complex landscape but also convinced that expansion and access have changed the university in fundamental and socially significant ways.

Students and the Limits of Access Categories

Finally, we want to note the complexity of student experience. The literature on access and WP is voluminous and covers an extensive array of cognate topics ranging from the pedagogic (teaching and learning, assessment) non-academic institutional structures (student supports such as disability services), the experiential (student voice, identity and transformation,

academic voice), entry routes and "pathways" (matriculation, types and location of access programmes), student retention and progression, differential rates of participation by social groups, social justice, funding mechanisms (student finance, recurrent and capital), a range of explanatory models (deficit, capability, social reproduction, etc.) and pretty much everything else that occurs under the label "higher education".[7] However, what seems to tie all this together, in both a distal and proximate way, is the focus on the so-called non-traditional student. This is a highly theoretical and methodologically problematic category, as it makes all sorts of assumptions about the socio-cultural characteristics of participants. Taking for example those labelled a "second chance" student or "educationally disadvantaged", the emphasis is unequivocally on the possession of a deficit, whether captured at the individual or communal level. The role of access from this perspective is one of remediation and redemption, of beginning to "fix" past transgressions and acts of symbolic violence. The explanations of how non-traditional students become non-traditional students are numerous and varied, but what is important to note is that these categories that are used to corral individuals can become reified or fetishised by HEIs and policy-makers. Given this, we would argue that non-traditional students (as much as their traditional peers) are a heterogeneous group and as varied as the number of classification schemas that can be applied to them.

Structure of the Book

This book has three sections. In the first section comprising Chaps. 2–5, we outline the general contextualised story of access. The second section of Chaps. 6–10 looks at the student groups that are important in access policy. The third section critically discusses the implications of the material covered in Parts I and II, with a specific emphasis on the analysis of the issues concerning organisation, management and implementation of learning and teaching, student retention, and lastly, the broader policy and theoretical questions which have been raised.

Part I provides the historical, policy and theoretical backdrop to access and WP in Ireland and contextualises this with reference to major international trends. Access and WP are phenomena that have a transnational dimension of which the Irish experience is part. Here, we contextualise access and WP within the expansion of HE more generally. Although the results of access and WP initiatives in Ireland have been mixed, it has, as a policy initiative, been embedded in Irish HE policy more generally, in particular, the areas of human

capital formation and the so-called knowledge economy agendas. It has also been a process marked by an array of what can be seen as unequal and contradictory discourses. Most notably are those about HE as a tool for social justice and inclusion on the one hand and on the other the discourse that gives priority to entrepreneurial, acquisitive, individualistic and competitive values as a route for national economic well-being. In the Irish context, it is the latter which has assumed the position of a discursive hegemony, despite a repeated rhetorical commitment to the issue of social justice by policy makers in Ireland and the EU. Thus, the expansion of HE and the discourse around it offer fascinating insights into the nature of politics, economy and society in Ireland.

However, paradoxically Irish public policy, political discourse and educational initiatives have been conducted without any explicit reference to the ideological context within which these activities are conducted. Although there is no explicitly articulated policy push by any government or state agency, the hidden (or not so hidden – just not named as such) agenda of HE policy, is informed by neoliberal axioms. As such, market mechanisms and the acceptance of its associated cultural norms are seen as being central to meet learning needs. The position of the author(s) highlights the extent to which Irish public policy is formulated within a not very explicit (but real) neoliberal framework.

Part II explores in five chapters the experiences of non-traditional students in Irish HE. Student experiences do tell in their narratives how the "demand-side" of HE is remarkably different to the perspective of the "supply-side". This forms a critical thread in the text that details the supports and barriers encountered by each of the major access groups. Each chapter offers an up to date review of research available on each of the major non-traditional student groups (working class students, students with disabilities, mature and part-time students, women and ethnic groups whether travellers or migrants). This way of presenting the material reflects the ways that these groups have become the focal points of policy and research. We also argue that these categories are problematic because they overlap, misrepresent or assume too much or too little about group experiences. We want to problematise this by foregrounding empirical research and student voices in order to go beyond the familiar construction of these students as "deficit" groups and descriptions of access as simply a "numbers game".

Part III critically discusses the implications of the material covered in Parts I and II with a specific emphasis on the analysis of the issues concerning learning and teaching as well as student retention and the broader

policy and theoretical questions in three chapters. The substantial and potentially far-reaching recent systemic changes which have been part of Irish HE since 2011 are only now being "felt" at an institutional level. In particular, there is the borrowing (from the Australian context) of the idea of state-institutional compacts as a steering device by "encouraging", with financial inducements, HEIs to align themselves with national economic and social policy. For access and WP in particular, this has led to target setting at the individual institutional level as part of their negotiated compacts.

Chapter 2: Key Trends in Irish Higher Education

This chapter will offer a critical overview of the key changes that have taken place in Irish HE since the late 1960s and in particular the ways in which the state, the economy and HE have interacted. The modernisation of Ireland is closely linked to the development of HE and this connection is played out in the policy initiatives of lifelong learning and WP. The international contexts in which both Ireland and HE operate are to a significant degree, a neoliberal policy and economic environment. The state navigates between being compliant with the economy and being proactive in the access story. But the current dominant position of the economy and the current iteration of the neoliberal attempt to dictate to both the state and HE. In this critique, an oppositional vision is also presented that attempts to reclaim the social good as a value of concern for HE as well as the state and carve out an educational agenda that involves fairness, justice and democracy.

Chapter 3: Access and Widening Participation – Stories from the Policy Domain

Our intention in this chapter is to explore the access story through the way in which it has become instantiated through its many and varied policy instruments. Part morality tale and part soap opera, the access story in this form mediates the ever-changing relationship between the state and the HEIs. The multiplicity of documents tied together in distal and proximate ways, also form the state's own redemption story; the array of national development plans, labour force projections, high-value infrastructure projects and the cheerfully entitled *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness: 2000–2003* (Department of the Taoiseach 2000) spoke of an

Ireland in which economic prowess was entwined with large dollops of social justice. The meta-narrative arraigned across all of these documents is of a state fulfilling its role as a conductor of exogenous instruments (legal, financial, political and so on) to create an environment in which communities and individuals can flourish. In short, the state merely creates the conditions for the good life and it is up to us to make use of this set of opportunities.

Chapter 4: Routes in: Access Categories, Mechanisms and Processes

Following on from Chap. 3, we consider how the access and WP policy "words are made flesh" through the mechanisms and pathways into HE. It is through paying attention to the minutiae of the little stories that we can get a sense of how the capillaries of power shape and form the possibilities and horizons of access. As we will argue, there may well be equality of opportunity but there is most definitely not equality of access. The use of the so-called reserved places in HEIs for certain categories of non-traditional students reinforces and reproduces the very inequalities the access and WP policies are meant to ameliorate. The barriers we alluded to above can exert a powerful affect not only on how participation is experienced but also on the likelihood of participation per se. The financing of a student's life (part-time or full-time) is for example (and unsurprisingly) unequally distributed. The burden falls most heavily on those underrepresented groups that the state aims to draw into HE, exacerbated by the economic downturn which saw grants and allowances disappear. As the Irish economy starts to recover and ironically austerity has become normalised, the debate once more turns to the issue of reintroduction of tuition fees along with some form of loan system. Locked within the irksome contest over the private versus public benefits of HE, the issue of "who pays" crystallises a fundamental neoliberal neurosis. On the one hand, there is the valorisation of the autocratic self and, on the other hand, the dominance of the community over the individual.

Chapter 5: The Purpose of Access: Equality, Social Mobility and the Knowledge Economy

Chapter 5 explores the way the purpose of access is discussed in policy and in particular looks at how a certain conception of equality with a knowledge-based economy has shaped access. The chapter also explores how this has

affected the way much of the research on access has been conducted and concludes with an argument for the renewal of the sociological imagination in policy and research.

Chapter 6: The Working Class and Higher Education Participation

Class has dominated discussion of access. Chapter 6 reviews the key literature on working class access to HE and draws on recent qualitative research on working class experiences of HE in order to outline a possible alternative way of thinking about class as well as exploring the implications of the findings for access in the future.

Chapter 7: Moving to Higher Education: Opportunities and Barriers Experienced by People with Disabilities

The international context and experience are important for understanding the progress of students with disabilities into and through the Irish system. National legislations on employment equality have been an important support for this cohort of students and these policy supports have encouraged institutions of HE to establish not only access routes but also Disability Offices in HE institutions. The Action Group on Access and the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) have been central to providing research, policy commentary and practical support. The routes from the secondary education system are crucial for disability sector and much effort has been invested in this to widen the participation of disabled students.

Chapter 8: Mature Students in Irish Higher Education

As part of the lifelong learning agenda, mature students were always considered to be an obvious group to draw more fully into HE as first-time entrants. It was long recognised that the Irish HE system has demonstrated an age-profile which has been heavily skewed towards what we have labelled the traditional student, i.e. school leavers aged between 18 and 22. Whilst focusing on this cohort during the early stages of massification and the state's aspiration to increase the proportion of this age group's presence in HE was logical enough, it has had uneven consequences for mature students. Although the absolute number of matures has increased overall, they are still relatively small vis-à-vis the "traditionals" and unevenly

distributed across the two sectors. In short, there are more matures in the IoTs than the universities and are more likely to be found on part-time programmes. In this chapter, state policy and wider socio-economic contexts of WP are critically considered in conjunction with empirical evidence exploring the implications of being a mature student.

Chapter 9: The Gender Experiences of Non-traditional Students in Irish Higher Education

One of the more inexplicable aspects of Irish access and WP policy has been the absence of gender as an equity concern. This chapter focuses on how gender is situated as part of enduring and deeply embedded inequalities in student access and participation to HE. This acknowledges how gender is shaped by the wider "social expectations women and men are subject to, institutional practices and culture which often reinforce persistent gendered inequalities and the commitment of institutional and national bodies towards the pursuit of gender equality". In this chapter, their silence is critically explored in terms of firstly participation more generally and secondly from the perspective of the DARE (disadvantaged access route to education). At the heart of this analysis lies a concern with the experiences of non-traditional learners, as they engage with the culture and structures of HE.

Chapter 10: The Semi-visible: Part-Timers and Flexible Learners

One of the more intractable problems within the access and WP agenda has been the sloth like development of part-time and flexible learning within HE. The purpose of this chapter is to explore this process mainly from the perspective of policy. Although ostensibly straightforward categories, part-time and flexible learning are highly problematic within the Irish policy context. This is largely to do with nebulous and fluid definitions which offer little in the way of grasping how it can or does work in practice. This is also compounded by the problem that other than numerical data, there is little in the way of empirical work on the experiences of this group of participants in HE. This is a major gap, given what has been from the state's perspective, a key policy instrument to increase participation since the late 1990s. Part-time and flexible provision are variable across the system, with the IoTs, as opposed to the universities, being at the forefront of this mode of teaching and

learning. Similar to the student experience, we also know very little about why HEIs offer or do not offer this form of provision.

Chapter 11: Learning and Teaching and Non-traditional Students

As part of the modernisation agenda for HE, not only did access and WP become part of the state's gaze, but also did the issue of teaching and learning (T&L). The advent of massification and a moral panic over the quality of T&L led to a number of initiatives which began in the mid-2000s. These were designed to instigate change not only in pedagogical practice, but also to convince academics (and particularly those in the research intensive HEIs) to take teaching seriously as an activity, rather than see as a contractual chore. The Bologna agreement, the National Qualifications Framework, modularisation and semesterisation, universal design, the embedding of academic developers (in HEIs and nationally) and, lastly, the fetish for student evaluations and a greater role for ICT have over the past 15 years considerably altered the T&L landscape. But buried within all of this structural and cultural "busi-ness" are the lives of academics and students woven together through pedagogical practice. The attention being paid to T&L is important, but whether it will benefit non-traditional students is a moot point, as it is commonly understood that T&L in adult education has a very different flavour to it. The extent to which these practices and underpinning philosophies are present in HE is also a moot point and one which we critically consider.

Chapter 12: Retention in Ireland's Higher Education Institutions

As students gain access, the story broadens to wonder how they might be best encouraged to complete the education journey. Since 1999 there has been a growing awareness that too many who at great financial and personal cost start the long journey to a qualification were not completing the task. Increasingly persistence is a key performance indicator of the success of WP and increasing access. This chapter identifies an important shift in the understanding of retention to a focus on encouraging success and measuring success rather than drop-out. It has also been identified as a social justice issue as it is perceived to be unfair if dreams are not realised and resources under-utilised. The

conclusion of much research is that the onus is on the institution to make more flexible provision to support the desire for success among non-traditional students.

Chapter 13: Conclusion

In this last chapter, we attempt to draw together the many policies, experiential and theoretical "threads" and "strands" which have been complicit in the access and WP story for the past two decades. In this text, we have attempted to problematise the relationship between the state, HEIs and the student. In particular, we have taken this relationship to be one which is layered and intersectional. Central to this is not only the very purpose to which access and WP have been informed by this relationship, but the theoretical and methodological axioms on which the so-called equity groups have been constructed. However, this (momentarily) notwithstanding, the access story is overlain with a metanarrative (no apologies to the postmodernists) which is about democratic participation within institutions which occupy a significant place in contemporary Irish society. This is not to merely suggest that they are significant because they only have a major bearing on an individual's life chances through accreditation, but they are or should be, places and spaces whereby knowledge and the other institutions which use this knowledge, is open to meaningful critique and transformation.

Notes

1. Academic research on HE in Ireland is a developing field, but there is a relatively limited number of book length studies on Irish HE in general. For a very thorough overview, see Clancy (2015a) and for a range of recent significant critical assessments of history, practices and pedagogy, see Loxley et al. (2014) and for a sharp polemic on the direction HE has taken, see Gallagher (2012) and for a major empirical study of management and governance, see Lynch et al. (2012) and also O'Malley (2012).
2. It is useful to note that Ireland, in comparison to other OECD countries, Ireland has one of the highest volumes of foreign direct investment (FDI). In 2013 (latest data), this was worth $38,329 million or 23 percent of that of the US ($166,411 million), the largest recipient of FDI. It is also useful to compare Ireland with France $25,904 million or Norway $16,665 million or Finland $3,393 million or the UK $45,945 million to get a sense of just how large the Irish economy is in terms of FDI (OECD 2014, p. 14). The

collection of Irish industries labelled by the OECD as "services" was worth in terms of FDI $269,372 million in 2012 (in 2008 = $137,463 million) in comparison to "manufacturing" which was $68,876 million. However, we need to be careful not to get too ecstatic about these headline numbers due to the way in which Ireland is used as a "revenue clearing house" for many multinationals.

3. There is considerable dispute over the organisation of the state and market in Irish society (Allen 2007; Kirby 2002; O'Riain 2000). The most salient point to the present discussion is that despite the rhetoric of neoliberal ideologues it is not so much the rolling back of the state that has taken place but a distinctive shift in the political cultural logic which guides decision making and the specific arrangement of power between the state, the market and the transitional bodies (Crouch 2011; Harvey 2005).
4. This project was the outcome of a conference held in Parma (1992) under the auspices of the Council of Europe's "Higher Education and Research Committee" and covered 44 countries.
5. This is a set of interlocking state and non-state agencies which exhibit varying degrees of autonomy which are held together with varying degrees of tightness and looseness via regulatory frameworks, negotiated arrangements, legal coercion and so on.
6. Alheit's focus is on adult education in this article but the analysis holds for post compulsory education as a whole.
7. Gorard's et al. (2006) review for the UK's Higher Education Funding Council identified 1,200 papers (including empirical and non-empirical work, reports, evaluations) between 1997 and 2005 covering mainly the UK. Our cursory search of the ERIC database for just peer reviewed articles using the terms "access" and "higher education" generated roughly 3,000 papers (published between 1972 and 2015). Narrowing it to (the more recent term) "widening participation" and "higher education" produced 308 results for the period 1999–2015.

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