

# Can we do it better? A case study of how reflection within a programme team supports changes and innovations to practice.

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## **Abstract**

*Adult learners, and women in particular, have to combat a number of specific barriers to participate in lifelong learning opportunities. Frequently, delivery modes of adult learning programmes do not take these varying demands into consideration (McCulloch & Stokes, 2008). However, when they do, positive results ensue. This case study discusses these issues, highlighting how innovations and changes to delivery methodologies of a part-time degree programme impacted positively on recruitment and retention of the viable student cohort of students.*

**Key Words:** (lifelong learning, barriers, accessible education)

## **Introduction**

Socio-cultural and cognitive models of development hold that people learn over the course of their lives, and, as a result, require and seek educational opportunities and provision over their lifetime (Jordan, Carlile & Stack, 2008, p.123). While academic institutions are in a position to devise and provide programmes to cater for all learners, they should consider the inclusion of those at different stages of the lifespan in their design (Jordan, Carlile & Stack, 2008, p.123). Unfortunately, research would indicate availability, design and delivery of programmes in academic institutions do not always meet this need (Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009; Tinto, 2010).

This is a recognised problem in the Irish context, with only 21 per cent of adults currently holding qualifications at NFQ level 8 or above. This pattern, combined with a challenging economic situation, increased government emphasis on a knowledge economy and rapid developments in higher education policy leads to a situation where “the scale of potential demand for higher education

from adults is very substantial” (Department of Education & Skills, 2011, p.46). The response of the Irish higher education sector and individual academic institutions to address these demands has been inadequate, with a persistent low level (12% - 16%) of part-time study opportunities, limiting the accessibility of higher education for working adults and adults with caring responsibilities (Department of Education & Skills, 2011, p.46-47).

This paper explores the issues of accessible higher education programmes. It investigates how without knowledge and understanding of the needs of the part-time adult student learner, market share is limited.

The structure of this paper is as follows: it begins by exploring the profile of adult learners and the barriers to participation encountered by this student cohort. Moving forward, the paper outlines the case, programme context and barriers to participation identified by potential students to a part-time Honours Bachelor of Arts (BA) Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme in a higher education institution. Finally, the paper will outline the essential changes made to address such barriers to participate in learning for adult learners in this case context.

### **The adult learner and barriers to lifelong learning**

Malcolm Knowles (1913 – 1997), the American educationalist who had an enormous influence on adult education, popularized the term ‘andragogy’, defining it as ‘the art and science of helping adults learn’ (Baumgartner et al., 2003; Jordan, Carlile & Stack, 2008). Adult learners, according to Knowles, are self-directed, independent learners who are ready to learn, are orientated to learn and motivated to learn (St. Clair, 2002; Clardy, 2005; Jordan, Carlile & Stack, 2008). In most cases, adult learners chose to return to education, and are therefore intrinsically motivated and are generally self-directing. Knowles adopted a humanistic approach to adult learning which holds that humans are motivated by an innate drive to fulfil their potential (Bernstein and Nash, 2005).

While adult learners may be intrinsically motivated to learn and bring with them a wealth of life experience to the classroom, there are challenges facing their decision to return to education such as geographical inconvenience, unfavourable programme delivery structure, monetary issues and personal responsibilities. (Bourdieu, 1986; DES, 2011; McTaggart, 2012). Specifically, issues of debt and delayed earnings are central to the lives of many people when considering returning to education, where often decisions on where and what to

study are based on their individual direct economic capital; whether they can afford to return to education and survive economically or not (Brennan and Osborne, 2008; Rose-Adams, 2012). The issue of affordability also takes into consideration the geographical convenience of higher education institutions, and the reality of whether students can afford to travel and/or move to access educational opportunities away from their support mechanisms of family and friends (Parry, 2005; Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009; Rose-Adams, 2012).

Equally, a student's decision to progress to higher education can be impacted negatively by an institution which does not provide programmes that reflect the student's individual needs in terms of programme structure and content. The impact of this on potential adult learners is that it can make it more difficult to return to, and successfully progress in, higher education if the student believes the institution is not meeting their needs, and does not support their cultural or social capital, in either the programme design or delivery (National Office of Equity of Access, 2008; Pegg & Di Paolo, 2013).

While these have been identified extensively in research exploring barriers to student recruitment, retention and attainment, research would also indicate that there are potentially many additional barriers for women. The White Paper, *Learning for Life* (2000), confirmed that education for adults should guarantee equality of access and participation for all adult learners, but the reality is that those working in the home with young children, especially women, are among those learners to be excluded from the educational system (DES, 2000). Therefore, barriers to participation in lifelong learning are many and challenging for women in particular as they can include not only monetary, time and location of education opportunities, but also the socio-psychological demands for many of the role responsibilities held such as being carer of the young, the elderly and employee (DES, 2000; Patterson & Dowd, 2010).

### **Early Childhood Care and Education landscape**

Ireland's Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector is evolving and developing rapidly. A dynamic policy context underpins practice, within a framework of quality service provision and a professional workforce (Course documentation for the B.A. in Early Childhood Education and Care, 2012). A significant milestone in 2002 was the development of the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR, 2002). This document explored the professionalization of the ECCE workforce

with particular emphasis on existing early years professionals. The framework went on to develop a blueprint for professional development for the sector.

One of the most influential policy changes was the introduction of the ECCE Scheme in 2009. This scheme aimed to provide all children in Ireland access to a free pre-school year of appropriate programme-based activities. More recently in 2010, a vision for the development of a graduate led workforce was initiated by the launch of a Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE sector (Department of Education & Skills, 2010a). This has been validated by a directive from the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) stating the only relevant discipline eligible for the higher capitation rate is an Early Childhood Care and Education NFQ level 7 and above award (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2011).

As can be seen, there is increasing recognition among academics and ECCE professionals that work which involves the care and educating of young children is complex and requires enhanced qualifications and ongoing professional development (The Early Years (Scottish) Framework, 2008; Early Years (0-6) (Northern Ireland) Strategy, 2010; The Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Strategy for Australia, 2012–2016, Department of Education and Employment and Workplace Relations (Australia), 2009; Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2010; Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (Scottish Standing Council), 2012).

This view is supported in the Irish context within the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002) which highlights the fact that ‘high quality early education leads to lasting cognitive and social benefits in children’ and, therefore, the professional education of early years practitioners is crucial in achieving success in providing quality ECCE services (Walsh, 2011).

Equally, at European level, CoRe, (2011), a European research project on Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care, suggests that a pre-requisite to a quality ECCE system is a professional and qualified ECCE workforce. This quality agenda requires a workforce where 60% of its members are educated to bachelor level (CoRe, 2011). Therefore, the opportunity to access further education and training through part time programmes and flexible modes of delivery is absolutely essential for the early year’s workforce and their service users.

### **Where we were**

The BA Hons. ECCE part-time programme in the case study institution was developed in September 2006, the same year as the first full-time ECCE programme. The programme was developed to meet the needs of 23% of the ECCE workforce in the region who had no formal qualifications to work with young children, and for those who had already obtained a level 5 and or 6 qualification in the ECCE field and wished to progress to a higher award on a part-time basis (DCYA, 2000). On the year of its commencement (2006) a small cohort of 11 students embarked on their part-time ECCE studies.

The original programme structure was complex and based on a template of another existing part-time programme in the relevant department of the case study institution. Students were required to attend college two evenings per week (7- 10 pm.) and on 12 Saturdays per year, at a cost of approximately 2,500 per annum. A Level 8 Honours degree would be awarded on the successful completion of two practice placements and 6 years of part-time study. This was an enormous commitment in time and on the finances of the learner and some withdrew from the programme early with a Level 7 award, after 4 years of part-time study.

While enquiries were made by prospective students and individual meetings held over the years since the first intake in 2006, insufficient applicants each year prevented a sustainable first year programme from starting. Similar to findings of other research in the area of student progression, the problem lay not with the intrinsic motivation of adult learners, but with the mode of delivery of the programme itself, and monetary issues (Parry, 2005; Tinto, 2010; Rose-Adams, 2013).

### **Professional reflection- can we do it better?**

Schön, (1987) has written extensively on the value of reflection for all professionals throughout their careers and, as professionals in the field of education, reflection on our work is key to our professional practice. It was clear from this process that the part-time programme in ECCE delivered in the case institute required restructuring. This decision making was timely and was supported by the publication of the ECCE Workforce Development Plan and its strategic vision of a graduate led workforce for the sector (DES, 2010a), and the previously mentioned directive from the OMCYA stating that the only relevant discipline and qualification eligible for the higher capitation rate is an ECCE NFQ level 7 and above award (DCYA, 2011).

Consultation meetings were held with representatives from the ECCE sector and pathways for continued professional development discussed. As a result, a new model of delivery emerged. The BA Honours programme is now delivered in 4.5 years with online support and face to face contact over 12 weekends each year (6 per semester, every second Friday and Saturday). Similar to the full-time structure, this programme requires students to complete two practice placements, each of four hundred hours duration. In recognition of the wealth of experience that some adult learners possess, students can seek recognition of prior learning for one of these practice placements.

The new structure was received with tremendous interest from the sector and 20 adult learners embarked on the first year of their part-time studies in ECCE in September 2011. Reducing the programme from 6 years to 4.5 and providing classes all day on a Friday and Saturday saved on time and cost of travelling to and from college, and was more manageable to fit with their existing family and work commitments. This removed the biggest barriers to learning identified by these part-time students.

Only one student withdrew from the programme, and this was due to significant family difficulties. Feedback from the cohort has been positive to date, and the structure although demanding, has been embraced by the students.

Students participating in the programme, in its new structure, did not request any changes to its delivery. Feedback was most positive, and many have highly recommended the programme to colleagues in the sector. As a result, the programme team has been requested to explore the possibility of delivering a similar model elsewhere.

### **Listening to our students**

This case study examines how complexity of delivery of lifelong learning programmes impacts on recruitment and retention in a higher education degree programme. However, when educational professionals with knowledge and skills of content and delivery take the opportunity to reflect and listen to their students they can shape and develop innovative practices to meet the needs of all key stakeholders.

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