



# LOOKING FORWARD



Investigating the Counselling and Support Needs of  
'Non-Traditional Students' in Irish Third-Level Education.

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'non-traditional' students in Irish third-level education.

A Research Initiative by Student Counselling Services, Trinity College Dublin, in  
partnership with Athlone Institute of Technology and University College Cork.

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# FOREWORD

This project arose out of a desire and commitment from Irish third-level counselling services to respond to the needs of an increasing number of non-traditional students, in an effort to provide equitable and efficient support services to all students. In recent years, annual counselling service evaluations highlighted increased rates of attendance by non-traditional students; namely mature students, students registered with the College Disability Service and students attending Access programmes. Discussions with other student counselling services revealed that they were experiencing similar trends. We consequently wanted to understand more about non-traditional students' counselling and support needs in an effort to enhance service provision, establish what if any further training student counsellors required to work effectively with these student groups, and assess any potential resource implications arising for student counselling and support services if access and participation rates by third-level cohorts of non-traditional students continued to grow.

The project was funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) through the Targeted/Strategic Initiatives. We are grateful to the HEA for their support, without which this project would not have been possible.

In undertaking the "Looking Forward" project, a number of partnerships were established. Student counselling services in Trinity collaborated with student counselling services in University College Cork and the Athlone Institute of Technology, with further statistical contributions from Institutes of Technology in Tallaght, Blanchardstown, and Dundalk. The project also had the Support of the Irish Association of University and College Counsellors (IAUCC). Claire Moloney, student counsellor at Trinity College, was seconded

to the post of project coordinator. The project was overseen by a steering group comprising of students, counsellors, academic staff, student services personnel, representatives from Disability Services, Access services, and organisations such as AHEAD, the Psychology Service for Asylum Seekers and Refugees, and Pavee Point.

Claire Moloney as project coordinator undertook the following work:

First, the project sought to establish the level of counselling services currently provided to non-traditional students. This was achieved through quantifying the numbers of students from the five targeted populations (mature students, socially disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, students from the travelling community and students with refugee status) attending third-level colleges in Ireland. The uptake of counselling by non-traditional students was then compared to rates of counselling from the total student body across six Irish third-level institutions.

Second, the counselling and support needs of non-traditional students were investigated through direct qualitative examination of the issues being presented by two of these groups; namely mature students and young students from socially disadvantaged areas. This work was undertaken by Daire Gilmartin and Sonya Walsh as a thesis for partial fulfilment of their Masters in Counselling Psychology at Trinity College.

Third, the project provided a platform to gather information about the training needs of staff of counselling services in Ireland in relation to the specific and unique needs of non-traditional student groups. Training needs outlined in the report provided a basis for conducting

a national training programme for staff of college counselling services which the project coordinator organised in association with the IAUCC. Furthermore, findings outlined in the report provided material for a number of presentations which were made by the project coordinator to third-level service professionals, including the Irish Universities Quality Board conference and the Confederation of Student Services in Ireland (C.S.S.I.) annual conference.

Keeping abreast of developments in widening access and participation of non-traditional students, the project also made contributions to a number of HEA initiatives, such as the Evaluation of Access Programmes, the discussion paper on funding for Equity of Access; and the Action Plan to Achieve Equity of Access to Higher Education.

Finally, the multi-method approach used in the current research contributed to the production of recommendations for staff of third-level student counselling services in order to enhance support services to students, inclusive of those from non-traditional backgrounds.

Limitations in current methods of data collection, discovered through completion of the research project, advanced a proposal for a national database and outcome measure for counselling services in line with the HEA commitment to improve the quality of public service data.

Taking a focused approach to identifying the counselling and support needs of non-traditional students in Irish third-level institutions allowed for links to be established and strengthened between the IAUCC

and the National Office for Equity and Access to Higher Education. The IAUCC remain committed to engaging in ongoing consultation with the National Office in terms of broadening access to education for non-traditional students and considering the implications of this diversification for college counselling services.

The following report outlines some of the research findings from work completed as part of a three-year project that commenced in Trinity Student Counselling Services in April 2004. It offers a useful insight into current counselling and support needs of non-traditional students in third-level education.

The report was compiled and edited by Dr Elaine Curran who replaced Claire Moloney as project coordinator.

I would like to thank all those who were involved in this project and the production of the present report, particularly Claire Moloney and Dr. Elaine Curran. Thanks also to Dr Myra O Regan, Senior Lecturer in the School of Computer Science and Statistics, and Dr Howard Smith, Head of the School of Psychology, who consulted on the project. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Pauline Coary, Senior Executive Officer, Student Counselling Services, who ran numerous database queries and provided administrative support to the project.

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## OVERVIEW

The traditional view of Irish third-level students as a homogenous group of young adults is changing. In recent years, the student populations of third-level institutions nationwide have become increasingly diverse. In recognition of the growing heterogeneity of students attending third-level education the Higher Education Authority (HEA) established a National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education in 2003, placing a central emphasis on “the need to make equality an integral element of the intellectual, cultural, social and economic ethos of higher education” (National Office, 2007). The National Office aims to facilitate equity of access to third-level education for a number of ‘non-traditional’ student groups including mature students, students with disabilities, students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and students who are from minority groups such as refugees or members of the traveller community.

The widening variety of students gaining access and entry to third-level education provides new challenges for student counselling services. Such services were originally set up with the needs of the ‘traditional’ student in mind. The increase in non-traditional student numbers highlights a clear necessity to re-evaluate service delivery.

In particular, there is a need to look at service access arrangements and identify whether students from non-traditional groups are currently availing of student counselling services. Regular consultation with the Irish Association of University and College Counsellors (IAUCC) and counselling staff at Trinity College Dublin provided anecdotal evidence of a disproportionately high referral ratio of non-traditional students seeking access to counselling appointments when compared with referral rates from the overall student body. This apparent trend in the demand for counselling appointments by non-traditional students provided the basis for the present research and raised three main questions for student counselling service provision:

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

## **Question One:**

**What is the current counselling provision for non-traditional students in third-level education in comparison to their traditional student peers?**

This question aimed to examine the validity of anecdotal evidence that non-traditional students appeared to be accessing student counselling services at a disproportionately higher rate than their traditional peers. The present research report aimed to establish whether this trend, if found, is representative of a national increase across third-level student counselling services.

## **Question Two:**

**What are the counselling and support needs of non-traditional students in Irish third-level education?**

More specifically, what were the experiences and specific support needs of this potentially rising population of non-traditional students, which may bring them into contact with student counselling services? Furthermore, if specific needs were identified, what demands would such needs place on current student counselling service structures?

## **Question Three:**

**What are the training needs and practice guidelines required by student counselling staff in order to provide a quality service to non-traditional students in a third-level setting?**

In particular, did counselling centre staff feel equipped to address the needs of non-traditional students? Were there existing training needs that could be identified by counselling centre staff in order to improve service delivery? Furthermore, what factors warranted inclusion in best-practice guidelines in order to assist counselling staff in supporting non-traditional students during their time in third-level education?

The three aforementioned questions set the context for the 'Looking Forward' project, a three year research initiative launched in 2004 by Trinity Student Counselling Services, in collaboration with University College Cork (UCC) and the Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT). Funding for the project was granted by the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

## RESEARCH AIMS & OBJECTIVES

The 'Looking Forward' project had a number of specific research objectives. First, in order to examine the current counselling provision for non-traditional students in third-level education, the 'Looking Forward' project aimed to:

- First, establish the percentage of students from five targeted populations of non-traditional students attending Irish third-level colleges (i.e., mature students, students with disabilities, students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, students from the travelling community, and students who are refugees) and compare this with equivalent rates of counselling access from the overall student body.
- Second, identify the counselling and support needs of non-traditional students in third-level education. This was done through direct, qualitative examination of the issues being presented by two non-traditional student groups who gained entry to third-level via access initiatives; namely, mature students and students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Third, identify the training needs of third-level student counselling service staff. In particular, the present research aimed to illuminate gaps in student counsellors' working knowledge of non-traditional students' specific counselling needs within a third-level student counselling setting and identify areas for further counselling service staff training.
- Finally, produce recommendations for best practice to act as a guideline for staff of third-level student counselling services and enhance their work with non-traditional students groups.

# REPORT OUTLINE

Findings that address each of the aforementioned objectives comprise the subsequent chapters of this report.

Chapter One provides an introduction to available literature outlining the counselling and support needs of non-traditional students. Each of five non-traditional student groups are discussed in turn (i.e., mature students, students with disability, students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, students who are refugees, and students from the traveller community), with specific reference to literature from the national and international research arena.

This leads into Chapter Two, outlining the legislative context and available policy documentation as applied to non-traditional students in the Irish third-level education system.

Following a review of literature and legislative context, a number of research initiatives, commissioned in response to the research questions posed at the outset of the project, are summated. Chapter Three outlines the methodology used in each of the research endeavours reported in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Four examines student enrolment figures, separating numbers of non-traditional students from the overall student body. In order to examine the level of counselling service attendance by non-traditional students, data from six participating third-level institutions were used to compare student referral rates to campus counselling services. Chapter Four also outlines data, collected via a survey with members of the Irish Association of University and College Counsellors (IAUCC), identifying areas for further counsellor training needed to enhance practice with non-traditional student groups.

The counselling and support needs of non-traditional students are explored by means of two separate qualitative studies commissioned by Trinity College's Student Counselling Service. Chapter Five provides an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the specific, individual experiences of mature students in their first year of third-level education in order to inform student counselling services about mature students' particular support needs.

In a complimentary fashion, Chapter Six focuses on investigating the experiences of young adults from socially disadvantaged backgrounds at third-level and examines the implications for student counselling services.

Finally conclusions drawn from the research undertaken as part of the 'Looking Forward' project are outlined in Chapter Seven. Recommendations for enhancing counselling practice and considerations for improving counselling service delivery are outlined.

Irish third-level student counselling services remain steadfast in their commitment to provide equitable and effective services to all students attending third-level education. The Irish Association of University and College Counsellors (IAUCC) sets out in its mission statement their definition of what counselling in third-level institutions involves:

*"A specialist service that is particularly sensitive to the developmental path of students and that provides appropriate support during this process. The primary task of a college counselling service is to enable individuals to become more effective in their lives both inside and outside of the institution. It provides an opportunity for students, at an individual level, to explore issues that are important to them. The work of the counsellor is therapeutic, developmental and practical, helping students through various issues that face them during their academic career".*

The present report reflects this ethos of service delivery in the recognition of an existing need to address the increasing numbers of non-traditional students accessing and participating in Irish third-level institutions. The findings outlined in this report provide an insight into the experiences of non-traditional students in Irish third-level education. Information gleaned from the present research offers a forum to identify some important steps for student counselling services to approach changing service demands and provide equitable support to a diverse student body.



# INTRODUCTION

Over a decade ago the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education (HEA, 1995) issued their landmark report in which they recognised on-going support for non-traditional students is an essential element of future access initiatives. In 2004, the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education published an Action Plan for achieving equity of access to third-level education in Ireland. As well as setting targets, the plan also set out a vision for broadening educational access for students from diverse backgrounds. This vision makes reference to “systems... to adequately support the participation of all learners” including non-traditional student groups such as mature students, students with disabilities, students who were from the refugee community, students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and students who are members of the traveller community.

Third-level student counselling services are a key component of the support system for non-traditional students participating in higher education institutions.

The following chapter aims to provide an introduction to the five groups of non-traditional students included in this report. Reference is made to available research detailing such students' experiences and consequent support needs within a third-level educational setting.

## MATURE STUDENTS

Mature students are defined as those students who are over the age of 23 years on the 1st of January of the year of entry (or re-entry) to a course that has been approved by the Higher Education Institute (Network of Irish Mature Student Officers, 2006). Mature, or 'second chance' students were included in a strategy mapped out by the Commission on the Points System (1999) to increase the participation of under-represented groups (i.e., non-traditional students) in third-level education. As part of the Points strategy a target was proposed for each third-level institution to set aside at least 15% of full-time undergraduate places in each faculty or department for mature students and for recognition of entry routes other than through Leaving Certificate examination results. In 2001 the HEA published a report, entitled *Report of the Action Group on Access to Higher Education*, in which percentage-based target projections for mature

students at third-level were set at 10% (part-time) up to 30% (fulltime and part-time combined) of total new entrants to Irish third-level institutions by the year 2006.

In response to the need to increase the participation of mature students, many third-level institutions established foundation, or 'access' courses, to prepare students to a standard so that they could compete for entry to third-level education. One such initiative is the Trinity Access Programme (TAP), established in Trinity College Dublin in 1993. TAP offers mature students an opportunity to complete a foundation course with a view to gaining entry to an Irish third-level institution.

While access arrangements for mature students have increased, challenges involved in attending third-level education do not end upon successful entry. Rather, students' needs vary and continue throughout their attendance. In recognition of the support needed by mature students following successful entry into third-level education the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education (HEA, 1995) recommended:

*“Mature students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, will continue to need targeted support when they have overcome the admission hurdle ... We see a particularly critical need in the first year during which counselling, study skills support... would be important elements” (p. 84).*

The importance of access to support services for mature students is not unique to an Irish context and is a feature of international research literature. While studies indicate that many mature students are generally very positive about their decision to attend third-level institutions, reports in the literature also draw attention to the fact that mature students have unique challenges to face at third level that often differ from that of the typically younger student (MacDonald & Stratta, 1998; Pascall & Cox, 1993). Bowl (2001) explored the experiences of 32 mature students as they made their transition to third-level education in the UK. The main themes emerging from Bowl's (2001) action research were an emphasis on education being a means to a “better life” juxtaposed with the necessity to “struggle” in terms of financial poverty, time-constraints, perceptions of tutor

indifference and a sense of marginalisation. Smithers & Griffin (1986) also found that mature students experienced greater pressure, demands and increased feelings of isolation. Bowl's (2001) research concluded:

*"Mature students, especially those with children, cannot build their social and academic lives around university. They have complex financial, personal and caring commitments around which they have to fit university...Although things appeared to get easier as time went by, for most, study was to be endured, rather than enjoyed". (Bowl, 2001, p. 155)*

Many mature students who enter higher education suffer from a sense of inadequacy about their perceived lack of academic skills (Shanahan, 2000) and some mature students feel they are at a disadvantage in comparison to their younger student-peers (McGivney, 1996). For many mature students, in particular if they have pre-existing negative experience of past education, there may be a strong fear of repeating past failure (Bowl, 2001; Roderick & Bell, 1981).

It stands to reason that an increase in mature students' access to third-level institutions will affect student counselling services as these students often face more difficulties in comparison to their younger student peers. McGivney (1996) asserted that if the retention rate of mature students is to be improved it is clear that good student support services are urgently required, especially now that a large number of students are moving to higher education from other learning environments, such as access courses, where they have become accustomed to higher levels of support.

The experiences and support needs of mature students in Trinity College Dublin was explored qualitatively in a research study commissioned by Trinity College student counselling service, the findings of which are summarised in Chapter Five. This research also provides a platform to discuss implications for student counselling services, in terms of meeting the specific needs of mature students attending third-level institutions.

## **STUDENTS FROM SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS**

The Education Act 1998 defines educational disadvantage as:

*"The impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools".*

The Department of Education and Science has created a number of programmes to address educational disadvantage in Irish second-level schools which operate under a framework outlined in their report entitled, *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: An Action Plan for Social Inclusion (DEIS, 2005)*. Several inclusion initiatives are outlined in DEIS second-level school service provision, including the "Disadvantaged Areas Scheme", in which 203 Irish post-primary schools were designated as disadvantaged and consequently provided additional supports to encourage school completion. "Giving Children an Even Break" was launched in 2001 to tackle disadvantage in giving school-age children quality education irrespective of their socio-economic circumstances. A further "School Completion Programme" was launched in 2002 as a retention initiative for 8-15 year olds, encouraging them to stay in school and consider options for further education.

While work is underway to support Irish students in completing secondary school education, third-level institutions have traditionally been the domain of the middle-class (Hodges, 2001). The Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education (HEA, 1995) recognised that students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds may have specific needs while in attendance at third-level education and recommends that in addition to the support provided to these students by access courses:

*"other on-going support is also necessary post-entry, related to improving study skills, counselling...to continue to offset problems of disadvantage and to enable such students to achieve their potential" (p.78).*

A number of important factors relating to socially disadvantaged students' experiences of third-level education warrant consideration in terms of addressing these students' specific counselling and support needs.

Many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to be first-generation university students (Terezini, Springer, Yaegar, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). This poses a number of unique difficulties for these students in terms of acculturation into third-level education. Research indicates that first-generation students have an increased tendency towards dropping out of third-level institutions prematurely (e.g., Ishitani, 2003; London, 1989). First-generation students may feel less prepared for college life in comparison to others who have the benefit of exposure to parental experiences of higher education (Olszewski-Kubilius & Scotts, 1992).

The importance of familial support and the salient role of parents in encouraging their children to attend third-level education appear from the research to play an important role in academic development from a young age (e.g., Jeynes, 2005; Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, & Grossman, 2003; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Olszewski-Kubilius and Scotts (1992) found students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds considered parents and teachers as their greatest sources of encouragement in deciding to attend higher education. Conversely, lack of information and guidance on course decisions can be compounded by a lack of academic role models (Birrell, Caldern, Dobson, & Smith, 2000). Following successful entry to third-level education encouragement from family and friends was found in the research literature to relate positively to persistence towards course completion by students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to be the exception in terms of both their school peers and the majority of students attending their third-level institution. Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, & Gregg et al. (1994) reported on findings from a focus group with first-year students who were first generation students across four university campuses. Findings showed that unique challenges faced these students, in particular the view that college attendance was something that separated them from friends and family.

Young people from disadvantaged social conditions may sometimes receive mixed messages from family about the value placed on third-level education and career choice. While family expectations may be high, maintaining a job and consequently financial input to the household may be equally if not more important (Mc Intosh & Greenlaw, 1986; Plummer, 2000). Lindstrom and VanSant (1986) claimed young third-level students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds might experience discouragement from attending university from their friends, receiving the message that going to university is a waste of time.

Some research suggests that students themselves may have personal reservations about attending university. Granfield (1991) investigated the experiences of working-class students at a prestigious law school in the US. The participants reported perceptions of social stigma because of their economic background. They also reported insecurity in relation to the low social class of their partners, their lack of social skills and etiquette, and many reported that they had 'sold out' to move up the social ladder.

Financially of course attending university puts a strain on students and families alike. Statistics from the United States for the college year 1995-1996 show that more than two-thirds of college undergraduates attending full-time education also worked (Choy, 2000). Students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are reportedly more likely to be from lower-income families with higher financial worries (Archer & Lamnin, 1985; Pliner & Brown, 1985; Terezini et al., 1996). This puts an obvious strain on the individual as working excessively to afford higher education (Metcalf, 2003) adversely affects the time and energy available to engage with third-level life (Perna & Cooper, 2004). Working long hours, even if employment is on campus, has also been linked with an increase in rates of college attrition (St. John, 2003).

Clearly, the economic strain on students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds is a likely consideration in deciding to attend and indeed continue participation in third-level education. Time constraints inherent in third-level education can interfere with academic performance (King, 2002), in particular when a student has competing external demands such as family responsibilities (Constantine & Chen, 1997; Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Phinney, Ong, & Madden, 2000).

Lynch (1999) categorised three sources of inequality in the Irish education system, which operate as barriers to inclusion for 'working class' students, namely economic, institutional and cultural differences. The qualitative experiences of Irish students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in their first year of third-level education also provide the subject matter of Chapter Six. The identified needs of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds guided and informed the author's suggested improvements in developing support structures for this non-traditional student group.

## **STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

A third group of non-traditional students are persons with disability. While disability services have been established in many third-level institutions in order to support students registered with disabilities on campus, 'disability' is used as an umbrella term which incorporates a variety of difficulties, including physical, medical, learning, sensory, and/or mental health difficulties. The range of students accessing and registering with third-level disability services is diverse, warranting involvement from a variety of student support services.

The Committee on Access and Participation of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education (1995) recognised that students with disabilities may require additional support during their time in third-level institutions. The Committee recognised that students

may need "personal assistance, appropriate transport, and suitable accommodation". Such supports can be necessary for students with physical, sensory, medical and learning disabilities. Students with mental health difficulties may require access to alternative primary support structures, such as student counselling services. In their 2003 Council Report entitled *'The Mental Health of Students in Higher Education'*, the Royal College of Psychiatrists London stated:

*"There is evidence, particularly from the evaluation of student counselling services, that the number of higher education students presenting with symptoms of mental ill health has increased in recent years...Mental health problems can be severely disruptive to the student's capacity to study and learn" (p.6).*

This situation is mirrored internationally. Increases in mental health issues have been reported by counselling centre staff for the past 20 years (e.g., Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, Benton, 2003; Bishop 1990; O'Malley, Wheeler, Murphey, O'Connell, & Waldo, 1990; Phippen, 1995; Stone & Archer, 1990).

In America, Mowbray, Megivern, Mandiberg, Strauss, Stein, & Collins et al (2006) averaged rates of mental health diagnoses across several college campuses in the US, reporting that 12-18% of students possessed a diagnosable mental health problem. Vastag (2000) reported the suicide rate in young American adults has made a three-fold increase since the 1940's becoming the second leading cause of death for this age-range. Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, and Benton (2003) tracked changes in referral rates for over 13,000 students, based on case descriptors over a 13-year period. Results from this research reported that while relationship difficulties were the most common referral issue in the early 1990's, reasons for attendance from 1994 onwards began to change with problems such as stress, anxiety, depression and suicide ideation reported as the primary concerns for attending students at campus counselling services. Similarly, Uffelman & Hardin (2002) reported students were more likely to access student counselling services if they considered their presenting difficulties to be urgent, such as issues of abuse, suicide ideation and severe depression.

In Britain, the Heads of University Counselling Services (HUCS) published a nationwide report of UK-based third-level institutions in 1999, entitled *Degrees of Disturbance: The New Agenda*, which drew attention to a rise in both attendance rates and mental health morbidity in students accessing student counselling services. According to a report from the Association of University College Counsellors (AUCC, 2001), depression was the most common

presenting issue at UK student counselling services with universities reporting between 38% and 49% of new referrals for depression in a given year. Deliberate self harm was reported at a rate of 5%, while suicide ideation was found in 6-10% of referral reasons at third-level counselling centres. Drug and alcohol misuse was reported at a referral rate of 2-5% across higher education institutions in the UK, with eating disorders (anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa) accounting for 6% of counselling attendance reasons.

In Ireland the situation appears similar. For example, depression was reportedly prevalent in one out of thirteen students at Irish third-level institutions (McKeon & Mynett-Johnson, 1999). Substance misuse, often linked with both the onset and maintenance of mental health difficulties was also reported as problematic. Kenny (2002) reported 51% of undergraduate students had used illegal drugs while 27% of women and 29% of men reported weekly binge-drinking.

It seems that mental health difficulties are increasingly prevalent in students attending third-level institutions. Mowbray et al (2006) outlined three primary reasons for this trend. First, the onset of many mental health difficulties often occur in late adolescence and early adulthood, a time when many people are accessing and participating in third-level education. Second, improvements in medication and changes in policy towards community-based treatment have led to increasing numbers of people with mental health difficulties participating in community activities such as further education. Third, the level of stressors inherent in attending third-level environments, including leaving home, moving towards adulthood, academic pressure and financial worries, can trigger a mental health episode for some vulnerable individuals.

While mental health issues in the public domain are resourced by community facilities, third-level student support services are often the first point of access and consequently the primary care resource accessed by students at third-level institutions. Student support services also provide a necessary support link for students with mental health difficulties who need some time out of third-level study or wish to re-enter third-level institutions following a period of absence, requiring bi-directional liaison and communication with community mental health services. Third-level counselling services also maintain a frontline position in dealing with crisis situations such as student suicide and psychological emergencies. In recognition of this duty of care, the Royal College of Psychiatrists recommend:

*"University counselling services are, in effect, the primary mental health care option for many students, and should be resourced accordingly" (p.8).*

## STUDENTS FROM THE TRAVELLING COMMUNITY

The Equal Status Act (2000) defines the traveller community as:

*“the community of people who are commonly called travellers and who are identified (by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions including, historically a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland”.*

In the 1996 census 10,891 travellers were recorded as resident in Ireland, a figure that increased to 23,681 using revised methods of data collection in the 2002 census. The number of travellers accessing and participating in third-level education is not routinely collected. *The Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community* (1995) recognised travellers as a marginalised group in Irish society who are over-represented in all measures of social disadvantage including academic attainment.

In 2004, the Department of Education and Science’s Visiting Teacher Service for travellers organised a ‘Traveller Parent Day’ in conjunction with Dublin City University’s Access Service. Statistics for traveller participation in post-primary education were presented, indicating that while there is some progression in traveller numbers accessing post-primary education, retention figures were unavailable and anecdotal evidence suggested “travellers are underachieving in primary and second level schools and this remains a challenge” (p. 19).

Rose & Shevlin (2004) collected data on young marginalised students’ experiences of second level education in the UK and Ireland. Participants included students from the traveller community. Findings from this study showed concerns regarding negative peer attitudes, exclusion from participation in the main curriculum, reduced teacher expectations of student achievement, and a general approach to access which ignored individual student needs. Students from the traveller community in second-level schools were reported as experiencing hostile peer attitudes (Rose & Shevlin, 2004), including the perception that travellers were ‘undeserving’, and unwilling to assimilate with the student body (Lodge & Lynch, 2003).

Although there is a deficit of statistical data on traveller participation in third-level education, there is no doubt that they are an under-represented group. In their January 2004 ‘*Comments to Assist the Development of a Traveller Education Strategy*’, the National Disability Authority (NDA) stated:

*“One of the outcomes of the lower educational achievements of Travellers is that they are less likely to be in a position to participate in further and higher courses....Another barrier is the*

*clash of the models of delivery of further and higher education with their cultural norms. In the late teens and early twenties many travellers are married and are founding families. These domestic responsibilities are largely incompatible with on-going education, as currently delivered. An urgent need exists to reconsider educational provision for young adult travellers with families....and providing relevant support facilities on site” (p.4).*

Rose & Shevlin’s (2004) research supports this commentary, reporting a mismatch between further education and the fact that travellers’ adult roles were clearly defined in advance, where qualifications bore little relevance to the traveller economy.

Only a minority of students from the travelling community access and participate in third-level education. Such students may need additional support from student counselling services in order to sustain their determination in navigating a new environment where their community support is limited.

## STUDENTS FROM THE REFUGEE COMMUNITY

A refugee can be defined as an individual who meets the requirements outlined in Article 1(a) of the Geneva Convention (1951), that is, a person who:

*“owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”.*

Refugees are either ‘programme’ refugees invited by the Irish government to remain in reply to humanitarian needs or ‘convention’ refugees who meet the criteria set out in the 1951 Convention (Refugee Information Service, 2001). In Ireland, an ‘asylum seeker’ is an individual who is seeking recognition as a refugee under the 1951 Convention.

Currently, asylum seekers in Ireland are not entitled to third-level education. This includes asylum seekers who obtain Leaving Certificate results in Ireland. Individuals that are officially recognised refugees however have the same entitlements to third-level education as Irish citizens and can avail of free tuition under the Free Fees Initiative (1995), provided they have been ordinarily resident in an Ireland or another EU member state for at least three of the five

years prior to the commencement of the course. A refugee that is pursuing an approved course but is not eligible for free fees may apply to the local authority who may means test the applicant and award a full or partial grant in respect of the candidate's lecture fees, under the Higher Education Grants Scheme. A legally distinct but nonetheless related category of third-level students is that of individuals who have been granted 'Leave to Remain in Ireland' at the discretion of the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform. This is a permission given on humanitarian grounds for a set period of time with the possibility of renewal. Individuals with 'leave to remain' do not qualify for the Department of Education's Free Fees scheme and must therefore pay third-level fees. Such individuals may apply for a maintenance grant from their local authority provided they meet certain criteria. In terms of counselling attendance, all students registered within third-level institutions are entitled to access student counselling and support services on campus. This includes registered students with refugee status and 'leave to remain'.

According to the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) within the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, education is a "hugely important factor" in the ongoing social process of integration. Moreover, due to social isolation and not having the right to work during the period of legal procedures seeking to clarify their status, refugees and people granted 'leave to remain' in Ireland can often experience their very first immersion into Irish society while pursuing third-level education.

According to the Irish Refugee Council (2004) there are a number of issues that potentially create a negative impact on those seeking refugee status in Ireland, including bereavement of family members, loss of their country, loss of culture and lifestyle, mental health issues, effects of traumatic events either directly experienced or observed, dealing with separation, racism, and insecurity regarding their status in Ireland. The Irish Refugee Council recommended therapeutic assistance should take priority over the asylum process. In recognition of the specific counselling and support needs of refugees and asylum seekers the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) created an information sheet for counsellors working with such individuals (Burchell, 2007).

In Ireland, there is little experiential research recording the experiences of refugees at third-level and the therapeutic skills used when working with these individuals. International research has identified some distinguishing characteristics of students from abroad and minority groups who are in attendance at third-level student counselling services.

International students are often dealing with changes in many aspects of their lives, from their sense of identity to their living environment (D'Ardenne & Mahtani, 1999). There can be a struggle for these students to achieve a balance between adjusting to the host culture and successful integration (Thomas & Althen, 1989). Students who are now living in a new environment may have diverse assumptions and values, which can influence whether they avail of counselling. For example, Pederson (1991) found that international students relied more on fellow nationals for assistance with personal issues than available services. This may be compounded by the fact that international students are also living in an alien environment with a different education system and possible language barriers.

Research on minority students in third-level education reports similar difficulties to those outlined in studies of international students. Minority students attending third-level also hold values and attitudes that are very different from the mainstream culture of the third-level institution which can cause them a more difficult route than their traditional peers (Daniel, 2007). Often when a student's sense of identity is central to their self-concept, moving to a new environment will involve searching for a new basis to support their identity even in a context where their identity is very different from the mainstream (Ethier & Deaux, 1994).

Cultural differences as a primary problem for non-traditional students are heavily cited in research from the USA, in particular assimilation difficulties by minority students into predominantly white, middle class American universities (e.g., Zea, Reisen, Beil, & Caplan, 1997), coupled with experiences of discrimination (e.g., Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Saldana, 1994; Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001) and alienation (e.g., Allen, 1992; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Fischer, 2007). Kearney, Draper, & Baron (2005) reported results across 40 US universities (n=1,166) which stated Caucasian students at third-level institutions indicated less distress at both intake and termination of student counselling appointments in comparison to African-American, Asian-American and Latino student groups. The researchers draw attention to the fact that acclimatisation difficulties, lack of social support, and racism continue to contribute to minority students presenting difficulties at student counselling services. Acculturative stress, stemming from difficulties for ethnic minorities in acculturation to a new environment was demonstrated in some research to be associated with a negative mood state (Paukert, Pettit, Perez, & Walker, 2006). Similarly, lack of social support in third-level was found to equate with higher levels of stress and lower academic performance (Newby- Fraser, & Schlebusch, 1997).

When considering the participation of refugees in third-level education, it is worthwhile reflecting on the findings of a study conducted by the Children's Research Centre in Trinity College Dublin (TCD). This study (Keogh & White, 2003) found that most immigrant students see education as the route out of disadvantage and have a strong desire and determination to proceed to third-level study. However, they need assistance to overcome the specific difficulties which inhibit access to third-level education.

The Higher Education Equality Unit (HEEU), established in 1992 to promote equality in Irish third-level education, set out an action plan for third-level institutions in response to the support needs of minority ethnic students:

*“Colleges should evaluate how well staffing and structuring of services, such as housing, counselling, career guidance, health etc., respond to the needs of minority ethnic students. Following such an evaluation, the college should plan how to develop these services appropriately”.* (HEEU, 1999, p. 10).

The recommendations outlined in the HEEU Action Plan are supported by international literature where third-level educational institutions are recognising a need to increase their knowledge of campus diversity, both in terms of students and faculty groups (Dumas-Hines, Cochran, & Williams, 2001). Such increases have implications for student counselling services.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT COUNSELLING SERVICES**

The provision of better access opportunities for non-traditional students needs to be matched by appropriate support services to enable students to access, continue and complete third-level education. Retention and achievement of non-traditional students is a research topic that exists as far back as the 1970s (e.g., Smith, Maxwell, Carney, & Fontaine, 1976; Walton, 1979). Poorer retention rates of non-traditional students at third-level institutions have been demonstrated as a worldwide phenomenon from the USA (e.g., Attinasi, 1989; Tierney 1992) to New Zealand (Benseman, Coxon, Anderson, & Benesman, 2006).

Increases in access need to be met by equivalent changes in the culture of higher-education institutions (Bowl, 2001; MacDonald & Stratta, 1998; Preece, 2000). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) performed a literature review of student outcome and concluded:

*“The level of student involvement and integration in any of the components of an institutions academic and social systems can*

*be a critical factor in students' persistence decisions”.* (p. 426).

A primary challenge for the counselling profession in general, including student counselling centres, is to equitably serve the needs of minority, or non-traditional students (Stone & Archer, 1990). There is a necessity for the student counsellor to transform and expand their interventions beyond the confines of the counselling room and enlist services both on campus and in the community (Leonard, 2002). This approach recognises the integral role of student support services in assisting the continuation and overall attainment of non-traditional students in third-level education.

Research literature also draws attention to the fact that non-traditional students may present at student counselling services with many unique and challenging issues. For many non-traditional students third-level is viewed as a time of struggle (Reay, 2002; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). Archer (1991) stated that 'non-traditional students:

*“may bring along significant psychological or interpersonal baggage....this baggage can cause significant difficulties in academic performance”.* (p.36).

It is not the case that every non-traditional student will need to access student support services and some non-traditional students show high levels of resilience in mastering a new environment (Masten, Hubbard, Gest, Tellegen, Garmezzy, & Ramirez, 1999). However, seeking support on campus was shown to be the most effective coping strategy for non-traditional students who are experiencing difficulties at third-level institutions (Phinney & Haas, 2003).

Making the decision to attend third-level education is a transitional time for most people. Students from non-traditional backgrounds appear from the literature to face a number of challenges over and above those of the traditional student, including financial worries, changes in family, peer relationships and environment, with a reduced social network by virtue of belonging to a non-traditional student group.

It is clear that student counselling services will need adequate resources if they are to continue to support non-traditional students with the difficulties they encounter when participating in Irish third-level education. Not only is it welcome that college counselling services should play a pivotal role in supporting non-traditional students, certain legislative developments over the course of the past number of years have made it imperative that they do so. The legislative context and its impact on third-level counselling services will be explored in the next chapter.

# 02



# LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT

In the last decade, there have been a number of legislative developments which are relevant to our consideration of counselling provision for non-traditional students within the third-level sector. The aim of this chapter is simply to highlight these pieces of legislation and invite reflection on the possible implications for student support services.

Let us first consider the Universities Act 1997. Regarding access to third-level education, the Universities Act gives consideration to non-traditional students, where third-level institutions are expected to:

*“promote access to the university and to university education by economically or socially disadvantaged people and by people from sections of society significantly under represented”.*

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) has a statutory function under the Universities Act 1997 to review third-level equality policies and in doing so, assist third-level institutions in developing strategies and programmes to ensure equality of opportunity. The Equality Review Team to the Higher Education Authority produced a report in 2004 that recommended:

*“Universities should take account of the particular needs of refugees and the barriers they face in seeking access to third-level education....the flexibility of the university’s response to mature students needs must be increased” (p.59).*

The Equal Status Act 2000 was amended by the Equality Act 2004 and the two Acts are known together as the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004. These Acts are relevant to four categories of non-traditional students - mature students, students with disabilities, students from the Traveller Community, and students from ethnic minority groups.

The Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004 allow universities or other third-level adult education institutions to provide different treatment in the allocation of places to mature students. In practice, this means that a significant proportion of mature students who enter third-level institutions obtain their place in college based on experience and interview rather than on the basis of Leaving Certificate points.

The definition of “disability” employed by the Equal Status Act 2000 is extremely broad and includes (p.5-6):

- (a) the total or partial absence of a person’s bodily or mental functions, including the absence of a part of the person’s body
- (b) the presence in the body of organisms causing, or likely to cause, chronic disease or illness,
- (c) the malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of a person’s body,
- (d) a condition or malfunction which results in a person learning differently from a person without the condition or malfunction, or
- (e) a condition, disease or illness which affects a person’s thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgement or which results in disturbed behaviour.

The Equal Status Act 2000 prohibits discrimination, both direct and indirect, in relation to access to any third-level facility. The legislation state that an educational establishment effectively discriminates against a student with a disability if it does not do all that is “reasonable” to accommodate that student. This accommodation can be by means of providing special treatment or facilities if without such accommodation it would be impossible or unduly difficult for the person to avail of the service provided by the educational establishment.

So what of third-level counselling services? How accessible are these services? Physical access is of course a major issue, but it is also quite a straightforward one. Whether or not a building is assessable in a physical sense can be fairly easily established. Other types of accessibility are less easily defined.

The issue of students with mental health difficulties deserves separate mention. This particular category of student is protected under the Equal Status Act 2000 and may avail of a student counselling service

as a primary care facility. However, due to the volume of demand on third-level counselling services the majority of such services focus on delivering short-term counselling intervention to their client populations. Students with severe and ongoing mental health problems may require a far higher level or longer duration of interventions if they are to succeed in college. This begs the question, with regard to students with mental health difficulties, what constitutes a "reasonable accommodation"?

The Equal Status Act 2000 also prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race (described as being of different colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin) and membership of the traveller community. How well equipped are college counselling services to meet the needs of students from these backgrounds? In an area of such sensitivity, delicacy and nuance, what safeguards are in place to mitigate against discrimination, particularly indirect discrimination?

The most recently enacted piece of legislation of relevance to non-traditional students is the Disability Act 2005. In this Act, disability is defined in section 2(1) as:

*"'Disability', in relation to a person, means a substantial restriction in capacity of the person to carry on a profession, business or occupation in the State or to participate in social or cultural life in the State by reason of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment."*

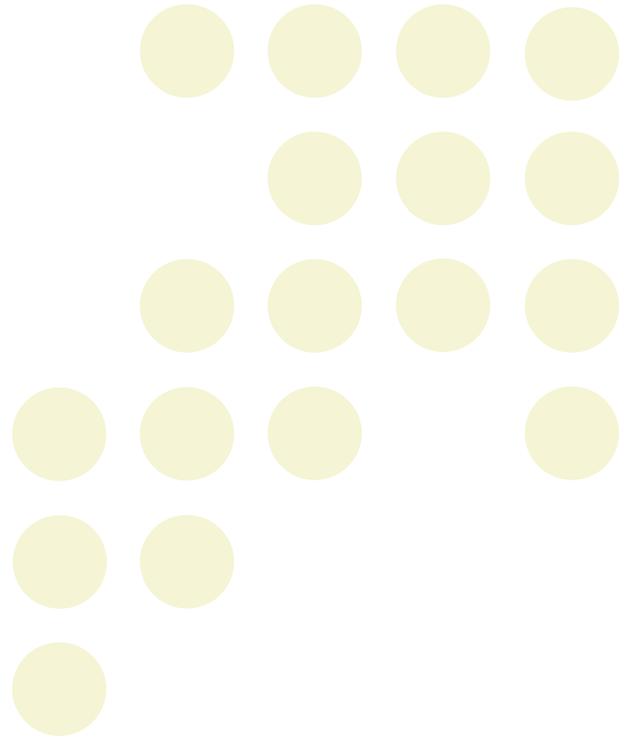
This definition is more restrictive than the definition used in the Equal Status Act 2000. Third-level institutions are deemed to be public bodies for the purposes of the Disability Act 2005 and as such, must comply with the requirements of the Act. Section 26 of the Act deals with access to services and requires the public body to work towards the "integrated" provision of services. This means that both able-bodied and disabled students should have access to the same service, a provision that came into force on the 31st of December 2005.

The Disability Act 2005 also addresses the issue of access to information. Most third-level student counselling services make available to the student body a wide variety of information in the form of websites, e-mails and information leaflets, as well as verbal information in the form of workshops and talks. Under the Disability Act 2005 third-level institutions must, "as far as practicable", ensure that the information is communicated in a way that is accessible to people with visual and hearing impairments. It is a further requirement of the 2005 Act that information provided to persons with intellectual disabilities must be provided in clear language and in a form that

is clearly understood. Whether the term "intellectual disability" is inclusive of dyslexia remains to be seen. This provision came into force on the 31st of December 2005.

It is interesting at this point to note legislative developments in countries with a longer history of access initiatives. In 2002 the American Psychological Association (APA) submitted recommendations to Congress to amend their *Higher Education Act of 1965* in order to provide necessary funds for campus mental and behavioural health service centres. The Campus Care and Counselling Bill (first proposed by the APA in 2002 to improve mental health services to third-level students) was included in the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act and passed the U.S. Senate in July 2004. The legislation called for \$10 million in competitive grants to be distributed to third-level student counselling centres, mental health clinics and psychology service centres to expand campus-based mental and behavioural health services for college students.

Movements in international legislation will have consequent developments for student counselling and support services. The Campus Care and Counselling Bill may perhaps offer an indication of the future direction of legislative developments in relation to providing resources to deal with increasing access to third-level student counselling and support services. To date there is no source of information regarding non-traditional students' current levels of access and support needs in Irish third-level counselling services. In order to bridge this gap the 'Looking Forward' project completed a number of research initiatives outlined in the subsequent chapters of the present report. The methodology used to complete this research is outlined in the next Chapter.





# METHODOLOGY

As outlined in the Introductory Chapters, the diversification of the student body and growth in Irish legislation have led to an increase in access and participation rates of students from non-traditional backgrounds in third-level education. Such differences provide challenges for student counselling services. In particular, there is a necessity to recognise the impact of changes in the student body on student counselling services and identify supports necessary to ensure parity, where all students' needs are met.

The 'Looking Forward' project was launched by Trinity College student counselling service, in collaboration with third-level counselling services in University College Cork (UCC) and the Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT). The project aimed to research the counselling and support needs of five target groups of non-traditional students in Irish third-level. These groups were mature students, students with disabilities, students who were refugees, students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and students from the traveller community.

This aim was explored by means of three distinct research questions:

- **What is the current counselling provision for non-traditional students in third-level education in comparison to their traditional student peers?**

In order to examine the counselling and support needs of non-traditional students, it was first necessary to explore whether such students were accessing student counselling services. To quantify the level of need for counselling services for non-traditional students, the proportional uptake of counselling appointments by non-traditional students across six distinct third-level institutions was examined and compared with counselling service access by the overall student body.

This proved to be a somewhat arduous task. In evaluating students use of third-level counselling services it is necessary to take into consideration an acknowledgement, from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Department of Education and Science,

that there is a need to improve the quality of public service data. In 2004, the HEA *Report of the High Level Group on University Equality Policies* (April 2004) investigated the data collection procedures used in Irish universities to collate information about student access and participation, concluding at this time:

*“Usually there are no arrangements for compiling data across the board and there is no central unit of responsibility. While figures for schemes and programmes are available on an individual basis, it is essential for proper assessment that these are pooled and available on a uniform basis right across the whole university sector” (p.21).*

Such a state of affairs, although improving, does pose a problem for those who are trying to develop their support services to meet the needs of existing non-traditional students and plan for an increase in numbers of non-traditional students in the future. However, despite the problems with uniform methods of data-collection, current sources of information provide an outline of students currently accessing and attending third-level education within an Irish context. Results are presented in Chapter Four.

- **What are the counselling and support needs of non-traditional students in Irish third-level education?**

In order to explore non-traditional students' counselling and support needs, students' experiences were voiced via two qualitative studies commissioned by Trinity College's student counselling service.

Chapter 5 summarises an exploration of the experiences of mature students who were in their first year of undergraduate study at Trinity College Dublin, having gained entry via the Trinity Access Programme (TAP), a government-funded initiative that aims to increase participation of students from non-traditional backgrounds in third-level education. Seven mature students participated in semi-structured interviews. The verbatim transcripts of these interviews served as the data for an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Dunsworth, 2003; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith, 2004).

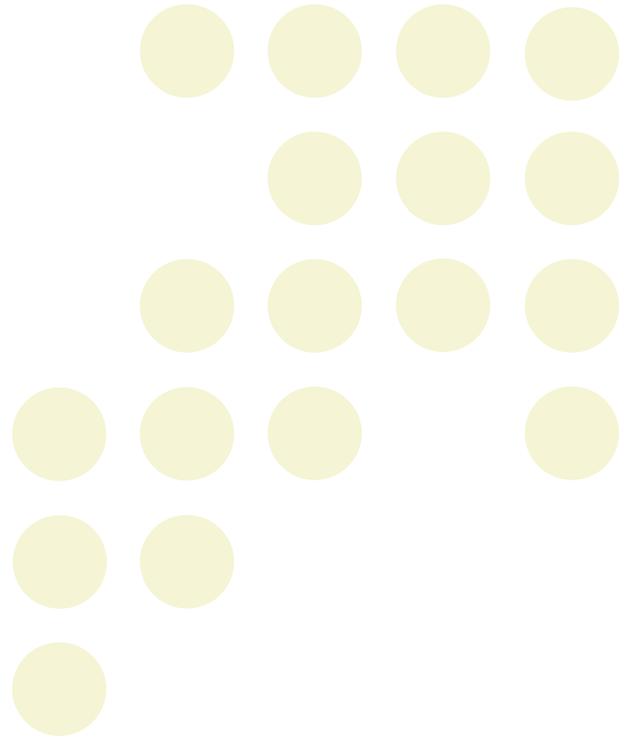
IPA attempts to enter as fully as possible into the participants' experiential world, to gain what Conrad (1987) referred to as an 'insider's perspective' on the topic being investigated. It adopts a phenomenological approach, exploring the participant's individual account of the area being looked at rather than attempting to amass categorical or objective data (Smith & Dunsworth, 2003). It recognises, however, that to enter into the experiential world of another completely cannot be done directly and is complicated by the researcher's own perceptual world. Analysis therefore is fundamentally interpretative (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Participants were also asked to share their personal experiences of higher education and make specific suggestions for student counselling service provision that may be of benefit to them or future mature students. Five themes emerged from analysis of transcripts, which are described under the headings of choice, personal impact, social comparison, coping, and support. Suggestions are also made to develop student counselling services.

Similarly, Chapter 6 outlines an exploration of the experiences of six young adults, aged 18-20 years, from socially disadvantaged backgrounds that were in their first undergraduate year at Trinity College Dublin. Participants were affiliated to the Trinity Access Programme (TAP). The research used semi-structured interviews to draw out various aspects of students' experiences at third level and examine their perceptions of counselling. The researcher transcribed each interview verbatim and transcripts were subjected to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Six key areas of participants' experiences were addressed during interview; namely, the decision to come to college, positive experiences of college, challenges/stressors in college, supports needed, attitudes towards counselling and perceived barriers to counselling attendance. Implications for student counselling services were also discussed.

■ **What are the training needs and practice guidelines required by student counselling staff in order to provide a quality service to non-traditional students in a third-level setting?**

A '*Needs Assessment Survey*' was designed in order to collect information about the training requirements of staff within student counselling services. This survey aimed to identify specific gaps in student counsellors' training in order to inform counselling service provision to non-traditional students. Following a brief pilot (n=11) the survey was completed by a convenience sample of student counsellors (n=23) who were members of the Irish Association of university and College Counsellors (IAUCC). Initial survey questions required student counsellors to indicate whether they felt the need for further training in order to adequately address the needs of each group of non-traditional student in turn. If further training was identified as a need for working with one or more non-traditional student groups the participating student counsellor was requested to elaborate, in an open-ended fashion, on areas for further training that would enhance their practice. Findings from this survey are presented in Chapter 4.

The main findings of the report were used to draw conclusions in Chapter 7, putting forth a number of recommendations in order to improve counsellor practice and enhance service delivery to non-traditional students accessing and participating in Irish third-level educational institutions.



# 04



# NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS' USE OF COLLEGE COUNSELLING SERVICES

In completion of the present research a number of public sources were utilised in order to obtain information pertaining to access and participation rates of students in Irish third-level education.

Census data for 2002 provide a picture of Irish educational accomplishments where 36% of the population had experience of participating in third-level education either in an ongoing or prior capacity. In 2002, 8.1 % of the total Irish population reported they had completed third-level, non-degree courses while 12.8% had obtained a degree or higher award from a third-level institution at the time of census data collection. A further 15.1% of people aged 15 years and over reported that they were in full-time education at the time of the 2002 census.

Statistics available from the Department of Education and Science, displayed in Table 1, detail a continual rise in full-time student numbers attending third-level institutions.

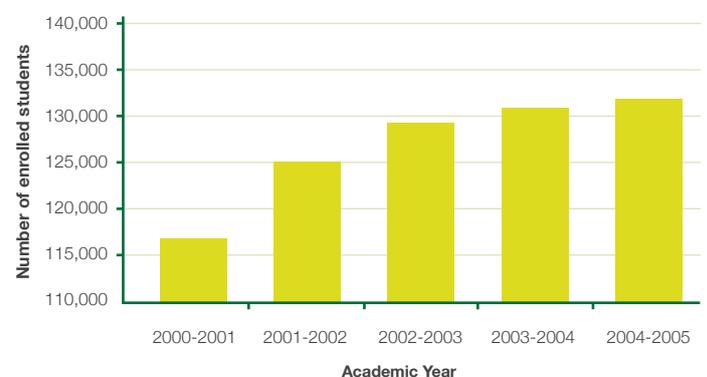
**TABLE 1:**  
**Student Numbers in full-time attendance at Irish third-level institutions**

Year	2000 - 2001	2001 - 2002	2002 - 2003	2003 - 2004	2004 - 2005
<b>Students in full-time third level</b>	119,991	124,589	129,283	133,887	136,719
<b>% increase from previous year</b>		3.8%	3.8%	3.6%	2.1%

Source: Department of Education and Science. Key Education Statistics

The increase in full-time student participation rates at third-level institutions between 2000-2001 and 2004-2005 are illustrated in Figure 1, where an increase of student enrolments appears to rise annually by an average of 3%, with the exception of a less pronounced increase of 2.1% in full-time enrolments from 2003-2004 to 2004-2005.

**FIGURE 1:**  
**Full-time student participation rates in third-level institutions 2000/2001 – 2004/2005.**



Source: Department of Education and Science. Key Education Statistics

A breakdown of statistics summarising rates of student enrolment in HEA-funded third-level undergraduate and postgraduate courses are available annually from the HEA. Figures displayed in Table 2 depict a continual rise in overall student enrolments in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses between the academic years 2000-2001 and 2004-2005.

**TABLE 2:**

HEA Student enrolment Figures on full-time and part-time courses 2000-2001 to 2004-2005

Year	2000 - 2001	2001 - 2002	2002 - 2003	2003 - 2004	2004 - 2005	% increase from 2000 - 2005
<b>Undergraduate enrolment</b>	65,844	68,952	70,647	71,735	75,027	14%
<b>Postgraduate enrolment</b>	17,218	19,410	21,408	22,034	22,316	30%
<b>Total enrolment</b>	<b>83,062</b>	<b>88,362</b>	<b>92,005</b>	<b>93,769</b>	<b>97,345</b>	<b>17%</b>
<b>Annual % increase</b>		<b>6.4%</b>	<b>4.1%</b>	<b>1.9%</b>	<b>3.8%</b>	

Figures adapted from Higher Education (2006) Key Facts and Figures Report.

As seen in Table 2, the total enrolment of students at HEA funded third-level institutions increased every year and showed an overall rise of 17% during the five-year academic period 2000-2001 and 2004-2005. When subdivided into undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments, the number of students enrolling in undergraduate courses increased by 14% between the academic years 2000-2001 and 2004-2005, while numbers of students enrolled in postgraduate courses increased by 30% during the same time period.

According to the HEA (2006) report entitled *Overview of Applicants and Acceptances to Higher Education*, school leavers comprise the largest pool of new entrants to higher education. Table 3 details the percentage increase in total new student entrants in HEA-funded institutions between the academic years 2000-2001 and 2005-2006.

**TABLE 3:**

New entrants to HEA funded institutions

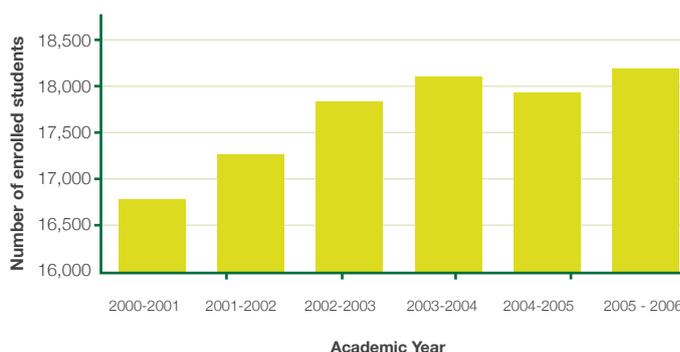
Year	2000 - 2001	2001 - 2002	2002 - 2003	2003 - 2004	2004 - 2005	2005 - 2006
<b>Total new entrants in full-time undergrad courses</b>	16,757	17,251	17,359	18,017	17,921	18,113
<b>% annual increase (decrease)</b>		2.9%	0.6%	3.8%	(0.5%)	1.1%

Adapted from HEA (2006). *An Overview of Applicants and Acceptances to Higher Education*.

As Table 3 shows, the total number of new entrants to HEA-funded institutions increased over a five year period, with the exception of the academic year 2004-2005 where there was a decrease of 0.5% in enrolment rates. This trend is illustrated in Figure 2.

**FIGURE 2:**

New undergraduate entrants to HEA-funded third-level institutions



Source: HEA (2006). *An Overview of Applicants and Acceptances to Higher Education*

According to the Higher Education Authority report (2006), entitled *Overview of Applications and Acceptances to Higher Education*, participation rates in third-level education have generally increased despite a decline in the school-leaving population. The report draws attention to the fact that from 1998 to 2006 there was an increase of 11% in the overall enrolment rate of students in higher education. The reason for this increase in student enrolments at a time when numbers of students leaving school were decreasing may be due to a number of factors. Some may argue that there is larger importance placed on acquiring third-level qualifications in recent years and there are also an increasing number of courses available within third-level institutions. Perhaps a further possibility for the steady increase in

student enrolment numbers is due to the diversification of the student body, with the inclusion of more non-traditional students.

The access and participation rates of non-traditional students are not apparent from overall student entry and enrolment figures, warranting further analysis of available data. In order to quantify what percentage of the student body comprised non-traditional students, this report was interested in whether the 2006 percentage targets set out by the National Office in 2001 are a true estimation of a predicted increase in 'non-traditional' student numbers and consequently whether such changes were reflected in attendance rates at third-level student counselling services.

The section which follows details results of statistical data, gathered from student counselling services located within six higher-education institutions:

- Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT)
- Dundalk Institute of Technology (ITD)
- Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB)
- Institute of Technology Tallaght (ITT)
- Trinity College Dublin (TCD)
- University College Cork (UCC)

While the six student counselling services in the third-level institutions listed above participated in general data collection, further collaboration was established between student counselling services in TCD, UCC and AIT in order to obtain more specific data for the

purposes of the present report. The six educational institutions included in this study represent the diversity of third-level settings in Ireland, including Universities and Institutes of Technology located in the North, South, East, and West of the country, with student population sizes ranging from under two thousand students to third-level colleges containing in excess of ten thousand students. Rates of counselling attendance collated from student counselling services were compared with overall enrolment figures from each participating institution, focusing specifically on five groups of non-traditional students; namely, mature students, students with disabilities, students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, students from the traveller community, and students from the refugee community. Statistical information pertaining to each non-traditional student group will be discussed in turn.

## MATURE STUDENTS

Between the years 2000 and 2005, the student population of Ireland rose from 83,062 to 97,343, an increase of 14,281 students. Given the 2006 target projections outlined by the National Office in 2001 (i.e., enrolment of new entrants comprising mature students was set at 10% for full-time new entrants, rising to 30% when including mature students attending on a part-time basis) it is interesting to examine whether the overall increase in the student population is also reflective of an increase in mature student numbers.

Available HEA annual statistics provide the number of new entrants to HEA funded third-level institutions, along with details of age ranges of successful entrants for each academic year. In order to calculate the number of mature students included in new entrant figures, Table 4 collates this information by dividing students into two age ranges, those under twenty-three years at the time of entry and those who

**TABLE 4:**

**New entrants to HEA funded Higher Level Institutes 1998-2006**

Year	1998 - 1999	1999 - 2000	2000 - 2001	2001 - 2002	2002 - 2003	2003 - 2004	2004 - 2005	2005 - 2006
<b>Total new entrants</b>	16,172	16,958	16,757	17,251	17,359	18,017	17,921	18,113
<b>Number of entrants under 23 years</b>	15,051	16,682	15,654	16,325	15,757	16,181	16,294	16,385
<b>Number of entrants under 23+ years</b>	1,121	1,276	1,103	1,426	1,602	1,819	1,619	1,689
<b>% of entrants under 23 years</b>	6.9%	7.5%	(6.6%)	8.3%	9.2%	10.0%	9.0%	9.3%
<b>% Annual increase (decrease)</b>		13.8%	(13.6%)	29.3%	12.3%	13.5%	10.9%	4.3%

Source: HEA statistics. Unknown ages were omitted in calculation.

were twenty-three and over at entry to third-level education. The latter group represent the level of new entrants who could be classified as mature students.

Table 4 reports that the percentage of mature students entering HEA funded third-level institutions ranged between 6.9% (1998-1999) and 10% (2003-2004) of the overall student body. While on average mature student enrolments in HEA-funded institutions (inclusive of TCD and UCC) are increasing, the percentage of first entrant's to HEA-funded institutions falls below the combined full-time and part-time target of 30% set out for 2006 by the National Office for Equity and Access to Third Level Education in 2001. Some answers for this may be found in a comparison of percentage increases or decreases in new enrolments in HEA-funded third-level institutions and equivalent percentage entry rates of mature students in such institutions, provided in Table 5.

**TABLE 5:**  
Comparison of new overall student enrolments and mature student enrolments in HEA funded third-level institutions.

Academic Year	2001 - 2002	2002 - 2003	2003 - 2004	2004 - 2005	2005 - 2006
<b>Annual % increase (decrease) in new Enrolments</b>	2.9%	0.6%	3.8%	(0.5%)	1.1%
<b>Annual % increase (decrease) in mature new entrants</b>	29.3%	12.3%	13.5%	(10.9%)	4.3%

Source: Compiled using available HEA statistics

Table 5 draws our attention to the fact that, with the exception of 2004-2005 where enrolment rates decreased, there has been a general increase in both overall student enrolments and mature student enrolments in HEA-funded third-level institutions. Furthermore, the percentage increase in mature student enrolments far exceeds the overall percentage of new enrolments in HEA-funded institutions in each year. It appears that in general while percentages of new enrolments are increasing, mature students account for a sizable proportion of these new enrolments.

As numbers of mature students enrolling in third-level institutions appear to be increasing according to HEA figures, it is interesting to explore the ways in which mature students are successfully accessing Irish third-level education. A number of mature students obtain entry

to third-level institutions using the CAO route, having gained the required points for third-level access in Leaving Certificate exams. Statistics detailing the number of mature students entering higher education institutions by the CAO route are detailed in Table 6.

**TABLE 6:**  
Number of Mature Students who entered via CAO 2000-2005.

Academic Year	1999 - 2000	2000 - 2001	2001 - 2002	2002 - 2003	2003 - 2004	2004 - 2005
<b>Overall CAO acceptance rate</b>	37,525	36,625	36,627	38,333	37,796	38,175
<b>Total mature students accepting a third-level place</b>	1,501	1,744	2,200	2,816	2,989	3,317
<b>% of mature students accepting a third-level place</b>	4.0%	4.8%	6.0%	7.3%	7.9%	8.7%

Source: CAO Directors Report

Table 6 displays an increase in the percentage of mature students accepting a place in Irish third-level institutions using the CAO route. Between the academic years 1999-2000 and 2004-2005, the percentage of mature students entering third-level education continued to rise and in fact doubled, from 4% to 8.7% within this six-year period.

While the CAO route is one option available for mature students entering third-level education, an alternative access route is by means of direct application for reserved places or through completion of a foundation/access course. For example, examination of student records data from Trinity College Dublin for the academic year 2005-2006 indicated that of 10,791 total new entrants to full-time and part-time undergraduate courses, 14% of these were mature students. A further breakdown of mature student data revealed that 67% of mature new entrants to full-time and part-time undergraduate courses accessed Trinity College via the CAO route, while the remaining mature students gained entry through alternative means such as direct entry to reserved places or through completion of an access programme. Student records from Trinity College for the academic year 2006-2007 also indicate an increase of 17% mature new entrants to combined full and part-time undergraduate courses, with a commensurate increase of 6% in mature students entering undergraduate study by means other than CAO application.

**TABLE 7:**

Comparison of mature students (23+ years) attending full-time third level education and attendance rates at student counselling services in 2005-2006.

	Third Level 1	Third Level 2	Third Level 3	Third Level 4	Third Level 5	Third Level 6	Total
Mature students as a percentage of the full-time undergraduate student body	4%	13%	19%	11%	17.5%	10%	<b>12%</b>
Mature students as a percentage of counselling attendees	19%	35%	24%	16%	17%	7%	<b>14%</b>
Percentage of student body attending for counselling appointments	2.5%	5.6%	3.3%	5.2%	4.5%	6.2%	<b>5.1%</b>
Percentage of mature students attending for counselling appointments	11.2%	14.5%	4.1%	7.4%	4.4%	4.6%	<b>6.0%</b>

Interestingly, this addition in numbers of mature students accessing and participating in third-level education has had a significant impact on third level student counselling services.

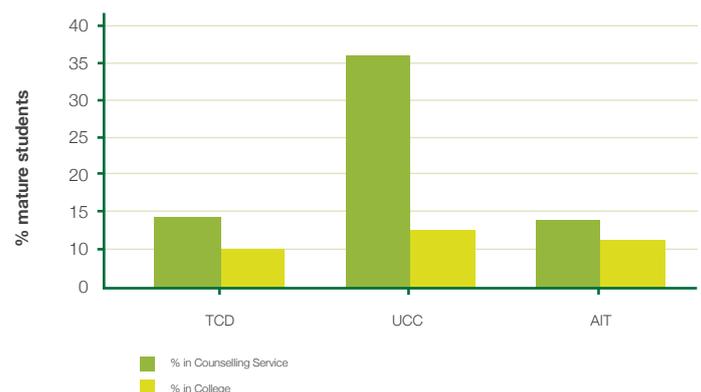
When the data from six participating third-level institutions was collated it was found that on average 5% of the general student population attend third-level student counselling services. However, when the rate of attendance of mature students, aged 23 years and above at the time of entry to third-level education, was examined separately it revealed their levels of attendance at third-level student counselling services was often disproportionately higher than attendance rates from the general student body. Table 7 illustrates the point more clearly. Due to the fact that enrolment figures are smaller in some participating third-level institutions than others, data across the six participating third-level institutions is presented anonymously as a protective measure to ensure the confidentiality of students accessing counselling services.

As shown in Table 7 above, mature students (23+ years) make up an average of 12% of the overall student body and comprise 14% of student counselling centre appointments. Variation exists between participating third-level institutions. In four out of six institutions mature students represent a higher percentage of students attending counselling services than their overall representation amongst the full-time, undergraduate student body. For example, in Third Level College 1, mature students make up just 4% of the total full-time undergraduate population. However, they comprise 19% of the students attending the counselling service in that college. This

discrepancy is highest in Third Level College 2. Table 7 also draws attention to the fact that mature students are generally attending student counselling services (6.0%) at a higher rate than the referral rate from the overall student body (5.1%). This trend is reflected in four out of six participating third-level institutions and the discrepancy is most pronounced again in Third-level College 2.

Snapshot data from three third-level institutions for the five month period August to December 2005 is presented in Figure 4 and reveals a similar picture in rates of mature students' counselling attendance.

**FIGURE 3:**  
 Counselling attendance compared with full-time undergraduate enrolment of mature students (23+ years) from 1st Aug. until 31st Dec. 2005.



As seen in Figure 3 (previous page), mature students (23+ years) consistently attended student counselling services at a disproportionately higher percentage rate than their overall representation within the student body across three separate third-level institutions within a four-month period at the beginning of the academic year, from August to December 2005. This discrepancy was most pronounced in UCC, where 12% of the student body comprised mature students. Figures from UCC student counselling services report 36% of students attending for counselling during the four-month timeframe were mature students.

As previously outlined, while the majority of mature students enter third-level education via the CAO route, a number of students enter third-level education by means of direct application schemes or through completion of access courses. Displayed in Table 8, the findings from an examination of annual reports from Trinity student counselling service revealed that mature students in Trinity College who entered third-level via an Access programme were on average three times more likely to avail of student counselling than the average percentage attendance rate from the student body.

**TABLE 8:**  
**Comparison of percentage student counselling referral rates from the total student body and mature students from Access programme.**

Academic Year	% referral rate from total student body	% referral rate of mature students (Access)
1998-1999	3.10%	10.34%
1999-2000	3.07%	11.49%
2000-2001	3.49%	13.47%
2001-2002	3.57%	10.32%
2002-2003	4.06%	11.05%
2003-2004	3.65%	18.32%
2004-2005	3.38%	10.66%
2005-2006	3.56%	11.11%
2006-2007	3.59%	10.28%

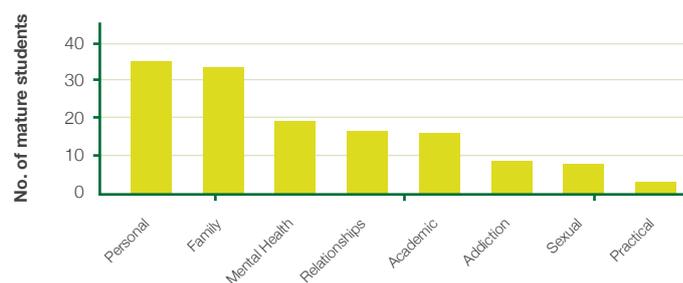
Source: Trinity College Student Counselling Service Annual Report

It is important to state here that the above average level of student counselling attendance by mature students is legitimate. Disproportionately high attendance rates of mature students for counselling and support can be due to a number of factors. Mature students may be more willing than their younger student peers to actively seek out support from student counselling services. Furthermore, the reality is that the life circumstances and demands placed on mature students participating in third-level education are

such that their need for counselling may be greater than that of the "traditional" student. Perhaps mature students who have completed an Access programme have become accustomed to receiving support from third-level institutions and are subsequently more likely to avail of counselling and support services throughout their continued participation in third-level institutions.

Mature students attend for counselling for a variety of issues. Figure 4 outlines the main reasons for attendance given by mature students attending UCC counselling services (n=35) between August 2004 and June 2005.

**FIGURE 4:**  
**Presenting issues for Mature Students at UCC Counselling Services from August 2004 to June 2005**



As seen in Figure 4, the majority of mature students in the UCC counselling service dataset identified 'Personal' (100%) and/or 'Family' issues (94.2%) as their primary presenting difficulty, with mental health issues (51%) also featuring strongly. Delving a little more deeply in order to examine the items subsumed under the heading 'Personal', issues such as self-esteem, confidence; anxiety, and stress were reported by mature students attending UCC counselling services. In fact, 13 of the 35 mature students to whom this data related identified "self-esteem/confidence" as the main issue of concern for them, with "anxiety" being identified as a primary concern by a further 6 mature students. The high frequency with which 'Family' (94.2%) and 'Relationship' issues (45.7%) were identified by the mature students in this sample is also echoed in the qualitative data presented in chapter 5.

### STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Principal statistics from the Central Statistics Office reported 8.3% of the Irish population in 2002 can be classified as having a disability. The first comprehensive survey of students with disabilities in third-level institutions was performed by AHEAD in 1993. At this time 990 students with disabilities were recorded as being enrolled in third-level institutions in the academic year 1993-1994. Discrepancies in

**TABLE 9:**

Comparison of % counselling attendance of student body and students registered with disabilities in 2005-2006.

	College 1	College 2	College 3	College 4	College 5	College 6	Total
<b>% students registered with disability in Student Body</b>	2.1%	2.5%	2.1%	4.0%	2.5%	3.4%	<b>3.3%</b>
<b>% counselling service attendees registered with disability</b>	16.7%	0%	0.9%	7.5%	11.1%	5.3%	<b>6.5%</b>
<b>% student body attending counselling service</b>	2.5%	5.6%	3.3%	5.2%	4.5%	6.2%	<b>5.1%</b>
<b>% students with disabilities attending counselling service</b>	19.6%	0%	1.4%	9.6%	19.6%	9.8%	<b>10.1%</b>

methods of data collection and definitions of inclusion criteria under the term 'disability' were highlighted in the AHEAD report, evidenced by the fact that some third-level institutions reported no such students enrolled while another third-level institution reported 260 students with disabilities in attendance. When compared with the total student body, the AHEAD survey found that in the vast majority of third-level institutions, students with disabilities generally comprised less than 1% of the overall third-level student body.

The *Report of the Action Group on Access to Higher Education* (2001) proposed increasing this percentage to a first-time entry target of 1.8% for students with a disability by the year 2006. This target is difficult to quantify with certainty as there is evidence to indicate that despite the best efforts of third-level disability officers, the number of students registered with college disability services is far lower than the actual number of students with disabilities attending third-level institutions. In 2004 the Students Union in Trinity College Dublin published a research report, entitled the '*Student Life Survey*', which revealed an interesting anomaly between the official figure for attending students with disabilities and the actual number of students with disabilities registered with the college disability service. This survey found that while 2.5% of respondents identified they had a disability, only 1.4% of them had registered with the Trinity College Disability Service. From this report it was concluded that approximately half of all students with disabilities in Trinity College did not avail of official supports provided by the Disability Service at the time the survey was conducted.

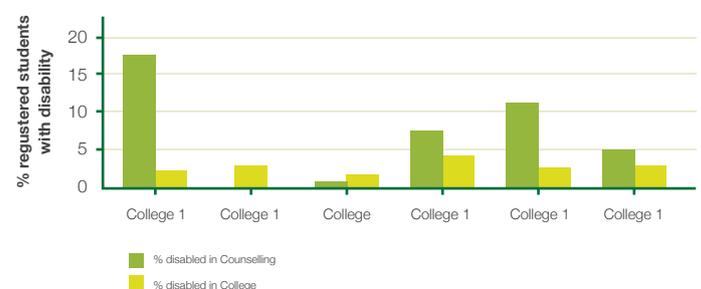
In a similar fashion to the aforementioned data collected on counselling attendance rates of mature students, data quantifying the number of students registered with disability services and comparable attendance rates at student counselling services were collected

across six participating third-level institutions. Results are displayed in Table 9.

Table 9 above shows an average of 3.3% of students registered with disability services across the six institutions. Students registered with disabilities took up an average 6.5% of appointments at student counselling services. Students registered with disabilities attended counselling at a rate that was approximately twice as high (10.1%) as counselling attendance rates from the total student body. Figure 5 illustrates this comparison.

**FIGURE 5:**

Comparison of registered students with disabilities in third-level and rates of counselling attendance, for the academic year, 2005 - 2006.



As seen in Figure 5, in four of the six participating third-level institutions students with disabilities are over-represented among student counselling service attendees during the academic year 2005-2006.

Figure 6 displays statistics from UCC and AIT, during the period August 2005 to December 2005, showing similarly inflated levels of

attendance at third-level student counselling services by students registered with disabilities, when compared with total third-level enrolment figures of students registered with disability services.

**FIGURE 6:**  
 UCC and AIT registered students with disabilities and attendance at counselling services, August-December 2005

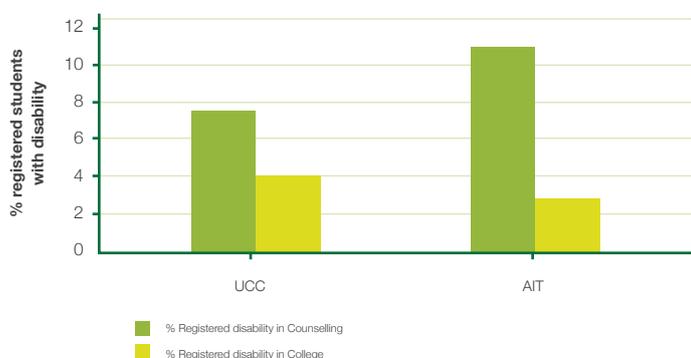


Figure 6 reports that while 4% of students were registered with UCC Disability Service between August and December 2005, a higher percentage of 10% of such students were in attendance at UCC Counselling Services during the same time period. Similarly, 2% of students in AIT were registered with disability services at the time of data collection while 12% of registered students were in attendance at AIT Counselling Services during the same time period.

Annual reports available from Trinity College student counselling service revealed a continual trend in the comparatively higher number of students registered with disabilities in attendance at counselling than attendance rates from the overall student body. Table 10 details this trend over a nine-year period.

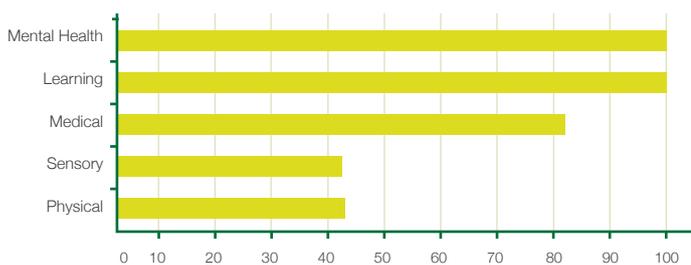
**TABLE 10:**  
 Comparison of percentage student counselling referral rates from the total student body and students registered with Trinity College Disability Service.

Academic Year	% referral rate from total student body	% referral rate of students registered disability services
1998-1999	3.10%	19.30%
1999-2000	3.07%	15.70%
2000-2001	3.49%	17.60%
2001-2002	3.57%	15.77%
2002-2003	4.06%	15.19%
2003-2004	3.65%	8.99%
2004-2005	3.38%	9.32%
2005-2006	3.56%	9.78%
2006-2007	3.59%	8.81%

Source: Trinity Student Counselling Services Annual Report

Extrapolating from these findings we can predict that as the numbers of students with disabilities attending third-level rise, there will be continued growth in the number of students with disabilities attending third-level student counselling services. Of course there are many different types of disability and if we are to understand why it is that students with disabilities are more likely to attend student counselling services than their traditional counterparts, we need to look at the categorical breakdown of disability types and see how this correlates with counselling attendance rates. For example, it may be a strong possibility that many non-registered students with disabilities are students with mental health difficulties and that these students primarily access the support they need from third-level student counselling services. Currently, third level college counselling services do not routinely collect this more specific data. The present report begins to address this gap in statistical data collection by collating student counsellors' direct experiences (n=23) of working with students with five categorical types of disability. Figure 7 outlines the findings gleaned from a survey of IAUCC counsellors (n=23).

**FIGURE 7:**  
**Third-level Counsellor's reports (n=23) of service provision for Student's with disability .**



As Figure 7 shows, all student counsellors surveyed (n=23) had, during the course of their work, come into contact with students with mental health difficulties. Such a finding is hardly surprising. Counselling services are generally regarded as places to go to address mental health issues. All of the student counsellors surveyed also had contact with students with learning difficulties. Students with learning difficulties often appeared to seek counselling in order to address issues parallel to their learning difficulties such as stress, confidence and self-esteem. Figure 7 also shows that less than half of the counsellors surveyed had contact with students with physical or sensory disabilities. Perhaps it is the case that the practical types of support offered by college disability services (e.g. note-taker, sign-language interpreter) are more in keeping with the immediate needs of students with physical and sensory disabilities, while the primary needs of students with mental health or learning difficulties are more likely akin to the psychological assistance available at third-level student counselling services.

### **SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED YOUNG STUDENTS**

By the year 2006 a target projection of 27% of new entrants comprising students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds was set out in the 2001 *Report of the Action Group on Access to Higher Education*. However, it was acknowledged in the 2004 National Office *Action Plan* that collection of data on the participation of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds in third-level institutions warrant revision in order to set accurate targets at the end of 2007. In the present report, accurate data on the numbers of socially disadvantaged students presenting at third-level counselling services proved very difficult to uncover. Many student counselling services do not record any specific data on social disadvantage and those who do use different definitions. For example, some services categorised a student as a "socially disadvantaged student" if that student gained entry to their college via a specific access program. Others included students from economically and socially disadvantaged

backgrounds that entered college via the CAO route. Clearly the second type of definition would cast a wider net and consequently yield a higher number of such students accessing and participating in third-level education. The 27% target projection estimated by the HEA (2001) defined socially disadvantaged students as those whose parents were registered at the time of college entry as being from an "agricultural" or "unskilled" occupational background. However, a revision of such categorical definitions is due in the near future, coupled with new percentage projections based on a clear definition of social disadvantage.

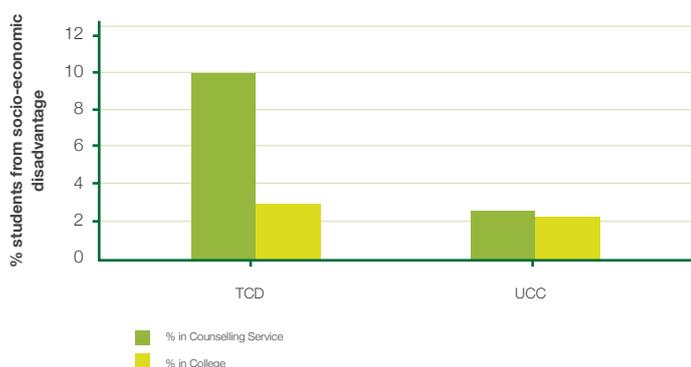
It could be argued that students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who enter third-level institutions via the traditional CAO route, without the assistance of an access program, are a more vulnerable group in that they do not, as a matter of course, receive any additional formal support. Students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who enter third-level via an access program are generally given both practical and personal support by the staff working in the access program. It could be hypothesised therefore that the "CAO points socially disadvantaged" students are more likely to seek help from student counselling services. As stated earlier, accurate data proved difficult to find. Calculations derived from available student records at Trinity College, for the year 2005-2006, showed that 2.63% of students accessed a place in Trinity College by means of the "Higher Education Access Route" (HEAR). The HEAR scheme:

*"targets those students who have the ability to benefit from and succeed in higher education but who for a variety of social and economic reasons, are under-represented at third-level. Normally, applicants to the scheme will have been in attendance at a linked school for the entire duration of their second-level education".*

Socio-economic reasons considered in application for third-level entry under the HEAR scheme include, long-term unemployment, low family income, little or no family tradition of progression onto higher education, and under-represented socio-economic groups in higher education.

Snapshot data from TCD and UCC, for the period August 2005 to December 2005, showed that students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who gained entry to third-level through completion of an access course form a larger proportion of respective student counselling service clients than they do of the overall third-level population. Figure 8 illustrates this point.

**FIGURE 8:**  
**Comparison of socio-economically disadvantaged students (Access schemes) in TCD and UCC and overall student counselling attendance rates, August-December 2005**



While there are a disproportionately higher number of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds attending student counselling services in both third-level institutions displayed in Figure 8, the disparity between the two percentages for the TCD population is significantly greater than UCC. This may be an issue that applies specifically to TCD, or perhaps is particular to Dublin. The cost of living is certainly higher in the capital and therefore it could be hypothesised that financial strains are more acutely felt by socially disadvantaged young students living in Dublin. It is also possible that there is something intrinsic to the Trinity College environment that makes it particularly challenging for socially disadvantaged young students. The qualitative data reported in Chapter 6 gives some indication of the factors which may be at play for socially disadvantaged young students in attendance at Trinity College.

**PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION BY THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY AND REFUGEE POPULATION**

An evaluation of Access Programmes, reported by the National Office for Equity and Access to higher education in 2006, noted “little progress has yet been made with attracting travellers into full-time higher education” (p. 46). According to the 2002 National census, travellers comprise 0.6% of the overall Irish population (n=23,681). Census data from the same year indicated only 2% of Travellers completed secondary school education. In the 2002 Irish Census, 197 travellers reported completion of higher-education, accounting for 1.4% of Travellers aged 15 years and over. Post-primary statistics presented in 2004 at a “Traveller Parent Day”, organised by the Visiting Teacher Service for travellers and Dublin City University, present a picture of very few travellers enrolled in post-

leaving certificate courses. For example, of 6,858 travellers enrolled in post-primary education between the academic years 1999-2000 and 2003-2004, only 59 of these students were reported to be enrolled in post-leaving certificate courses within the same five-year period. The *Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy* (2006) provided an estimate of 28 travellers enrolled in higher education in the year 2004, of which most were participating under the access scheme for disadvantaged mature students.

Within the years 2000-2005, 6,814 asylum-seekers were recognised as refugees, of which 59% were awarded refugee status after an appeal process. No data is currently available indicating the access and participation rates of students from the refugee community in third-level education. Targets were not set out in the 2001 *Report of the Action Group on Access to Higher Education* for students who were members of the traveller community or students from ethnic minority groups. This was largely due to the fact that statistical records of such students were not routinely collected by the HEA, Department of Education and Science or the higher education institutions themselves.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that participation by members of the traveller community in third-level education is low, if not nil, in some cases. As for students from the refugee community, there are some indications of increasing levels of participation by this group but further research in this area is needed.

**CURRENT TRENDS IN ACCESS TO THIRD-LEVEL AND UPTAKE OF STUDENT COUNSELLING SERVICE APPOINTMENTS**

With the population of students at third-level institutions rising, including an increase in rates of access and participation by non-traditional students, the present report examined the 2006 target projections, estimated by the HEA in 2001, to see if the predicted rise in non-traditional student numbers was an accurate reflection of the growing diversification of students within six participating third-level institutions in the academic year 2006-2007. Table 11 displays the HEA percentage target projections and reported targets achieved within HEA-funded institutions in relation to two non-traditional student groups – mature students and students with disability. The percentage of these two student groups attending the six participating institutions in the present research are outlined for comparison.

**TABLE 11:**

HEA Target Projections and uptake of students in HEA funded and participating third-level institutions, 2005-2006

	Mature Students	Students registered with disability
<b>HEA 2006 Action Group Target % of new entrants</b>	10% full-time 30% pull-time & full-time combined	1.8%
<b>Reported Targets achieved in HEA-sponsored third-level institutions</b>	9.7%	2.4%
<b>'Non-traditional' Undergraduate students from participating third-level institutions 2005 - 2006</b>	12.0%	3.3%

As shown in Table 11, an average of 12.0% of the student body in the six participating third-level institutions in the present research comprised mature students. This is above the HEA target project of 10% for fulltime students but falls short of the HEA projection of 30% of combined full-time and part-time mature student numbers. This 12.0% average enrolment rate is higher than the reported 9.7% enrolment rate reportedly achieved by HEA-funded institutions, perhaps indicating a difference in enrolments of mature students in specific types of third-level institutions such as institutes of technology. However, more extensive research would be required in order to draw any conclusions from this discrepancy. In terms of participation for students with disability, 3.3% comprised students registered with student disability services, a percentage that exceeded the HEA target of 1.8% by 2006 and the HEA-funded institution enrolment percentage of 2.4%.

An examination of counselling attendance during the same academic year is outlined in Table 12, which compares the average referral rate of students to counselling services with referral rates of mature students and students with disability across the six participating third-level institutions in 2005-2006.

**TABLE 12:**

Comparison of 2005-2006 counselling attendance rates within six participating third-level institutions

	Student body	Mature students	Students registered with disability
<b>Average referral rate 2005 - 2006</b>	5.1%	6.0%	10.1%

Table 12 indicates that while an average of 5.1% of the total student body accessed student counselling services during the academic year 2005-2006, the percentage of mature students accessing this service in participating institutions was slightly higher at 6.0%. Table 12 also draws attention to the fact that 10.1% of students registered with disability accessed counselling in the academic year 2005-2006. This percentage is approximately double that of the average counselling attendance of 5.1% from the total student body.

The HEA set a percentage target of 27% of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and this figure was established using two socio-economic indicators – students whose parents were engaged in either unskilled or agricultural work – a system that is due for revision and extension to other groups at the end of 2007. No targets were set for students from minority groups such as refugees and the travelling community. However, these non-traditional student groups will be reportedly included in future target setting by the HEA.

While these statistics have implications for student counselling service provision, a caveat exists in recognition of the fact that data collection procedures in third-level student counselling services are not always uniform. In order to address this confounding factor, the present research extended the field of inquiry, to examine counsellor's direct experiences of providing services to non-traditional students. In March 2006, 23 members of the Irish Association of University and College Counsellors (IAUCC) were surveyed regarding their individual experience of one-to-one and group counselling with the various non-traditional student groups. All participating student counsellors reported experience of one-to-one sessions with mature students, students with disability and students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Only 35% of counsellors reported direct, one-to-one experience of working with students from the refugee community. This percentage dropped to a mere 9% of student counsellors who reported working individually with students from the travelling community.

When asked about their experience of group counselling with non-traditional students, less than half of respondents answered “No” to groupwork service provision with any non-traditional student group. The largest percentage of groupwork service provision (26%) was provided for mature students, with 17% of counsellors reporting experience of groupwork service provision for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. A lesser 13% of student counsellors reported experience of facilitating groupwork for students with disability. Once again students from minority groups such as refugees and travellers received an equally low level of groupwork service provision, with only 4% of participating student counsellors indicating they had experience of groupwork with these non-traditional student groups. The fact that fewer counsellors reported experience of groupwork service provision in comparison to one-to-one work may be due to a variety of reasons. Perhaps for many student counselling services adequate resources do not exist that would allow for group interventions. Furthermore, in smaller third-level institutions students are more visible and group participants may be in the same class, which may act as a deterrent for some students in seeking out groupwork interventions.

### FUTURE TRAINING NEEDS

In order to improve the equity of current counselling service provision for all students, including non-traditional students, third-level counsellors (n=23) were asked to indicate what further training they thought would enhance their counselling practice with each of the five groups of non-traditional students. Findings are presented in Table 13.

**TABLE 13:**  
**Student Counsellors’ requests for further training**

Non-traditional student group	Further training necessary
Students from the refugee community	91%
Students with disability	91%
Students from the traveller community	78%
Students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds	48%
Mature students	31%

As outlined in Table 13, one of the largest areas identified for further training was working with students from the refugee community, with 91% of counsellors indicating their desire for training. An examination of suggestions for further training in this area included, training on national policy in relation to legal rights and the implications of this for the counselling process, working with trauma including torture,

advancing knowledge of cultural and religious norms for a variety of populations, increased understanding of refugees experiences of Irish third-level institutions including how participation in Irish education is viewed within the refugee community, and building skills in cross-cultural counselling.

The majority of counsellors (91%) also expressed an interest in further training for working with students with disability. An analysis of counsellors’ training requirements revealed the majority of counsellors wished to further their skills in dealing with mental health difficulties. This makes intuitive sense, given that 100% of counsellors reported experience of working with students presenting with mental health problems. Requests for an update in legal and policy issues were coupled with requirements for time-limited strategies to deal with specific mental health issues such as anxiety and attention deficit disorder. Other suggestions for training included direct feedback from students with mental health problems about their experiences of third-level education, including recommendations for increasing accessibility and participation in counselling and support services. Other areas of training interest within the realm of disability included refresher training on working with hearing impaired clients, including the integration of interpreters in the therapeutic process, increased knowledge of study skills for students with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, the need to advance knowledge among student counsellors of community services and resources available for students with disability, practical suggestions to enhance independence in students with physical and sensory disability, and issues regarding sexual health.

More than three-quarters of student counsellors (78%) indicated their desire for further training in working with students from the travelling community. In particular, counsellors wished to enhance their knowledge of cultural norms and values, potential barriers to engaging in counselling, and travellers’ perceptions of third-level education.

Interestingly, less than half of participating counsellors reported the necessity for further training in working with mature students (31%) or students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (48%). Perhaps this is due to the fact that a number of third-level access initiatives are currently in place for both of these non-traditional student groups. Existing access programmes may have led to increased familiarity in dealing with these students in student counselling services. Furthermore, while groupwork programmes are not offered as frequently as one-to-one interventions, over half of the participating counsellors indicated they had experience of providing groups for mature students and students from socially disadvantaged

backgrounds, indicating a higher degree of familiarity in working with these non-traditional student groups. The increase in access initiatives has also paralleled an increase in third-level staff with specific duties to work with such students during their attendance at access courses. Thus liaison between staff working on access initiatives and student counsellors may also explain, in part, why less training is thought to be a requirement in order to enhance practice in working with these non-traditional student groups.

Issues which arose as areas for further training in working with mature students included exploration of working from a systemic framework, addressing issues such as marriage and relationships, and the desire to further knowledge of financial and other community support services available for mature students. While less than half of participating counsellors indicated a necessity for further training in working with students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, training interests included more information on community services available and a willingness to become aware of specific problems related to such non-traditional students in order to broaden avenues of support.

## SUMMARY

Although current methods of data collection warrant revision, statistics reported in the present chapter provide some interesting information for student support and counselling services. Overall, student entry and enrolment rates in Irish third-level institutions appear to be increasing, despite a decline in the school leaving population. This increase in student numbers includes non-traditional students groups.

Mature students account for a sizeable proportion of overall new entrants over the past number of years and were shown to access third-level education primarily through the CAO route or to a lesser extent by means of direct entry schemes or access initiatives. In terms of student counselling, mature students (23+ years old) attended for counselling appointments at a slightly higher rate, on average, than the counselling attendance rate from the overall student body. Annual reports from Trinity student counselling services showed that mature students from access initiatives were attending for counselling on average three times more than attendees from the total student body. Data from University College Cork provided a breakdown of referral reasons for counselling attendance, with personal, family and relationship issues as predominant referral reasons indicated by mature students accessing student counselling in UCC.

An examination of students registered with disability services revealed that students registering with third-level disability services were also steadily increasing in the past ten years. However, it was acknowledged that registered students are not a true estimation of the total number of students with disabilities within the student body. Participating third-level institutions demonstrated a disproportionately higher number of students registered with disability in attendance at student counselling services. Such students were on average twice as likely to attend for counselling in comparison to the average attendance rate of students from the overall student body. A clear picture of counselling attendance rates of students registered with disability services is somewhat obscured by the fact that 'disability' was used as an umbrella term, leading to an absence of information about whether students with certain types of disability make up this disproportionate counselling access rate.

Data collection from participating student counselling services also revealed some differences in definitions of certain non-traditional student groups. In particular, while the number of students registered with third-level disability services was obtainable from most student counselling services, the general use of the term "disability" prevented current data collection methods from distilling the type of disability students were presenting to counselling services with.

A survey of IAUCC third-level student counselling staff (n=23) provided a breakdown of experiences of counselling service provision to students registered within five categories of disability. Results from this survey revealed that all participating student counsellors had worked with students with mental health issues and learning difficulties. Over three-quarters of counsellors had direct experience of working with students that had medical problems. Less than half of the counsellors who completed the survey had direct experience of counselling students with sensory or physical disabilities.

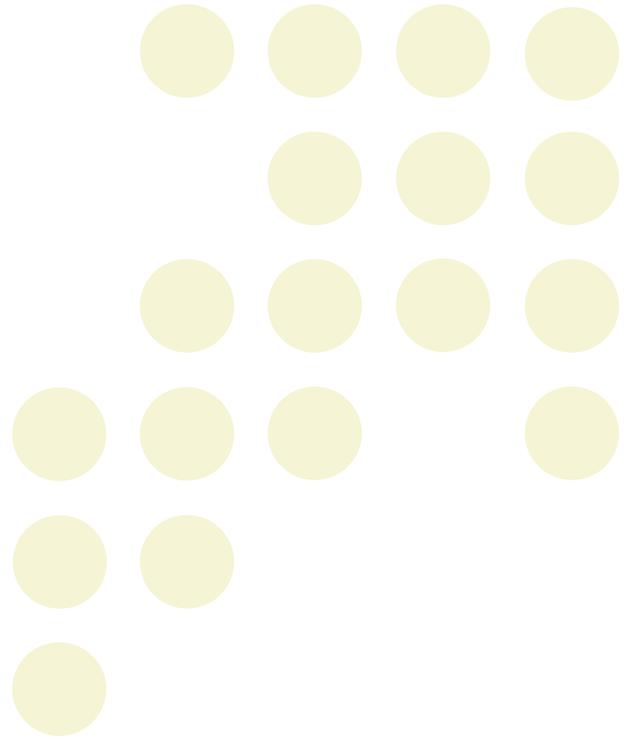
Statistical data regarding students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds was difficult to collect due to the absence of a uniform means of information gathering across third-level institutions. Available data told a familiar story. Two third-level institutions (TCD and UCC) demonstrated that students entering third-level through an access programme had a higher attendance rate at student counselling in comparison to the total student body.

Data was unavailable for students from the travelling and refugee communities, both in terms of their access to third-level institutions and rates of student counselling attendance.

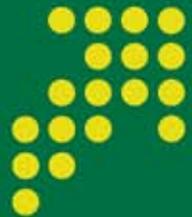
An examination of HEA target projections for the year 2006 was conducted, comparing percentages of mature students and students with disabilities enrolled in six participating third-level institutions during the academic year 2005-2006. Results found mature students were attending participating third-level institutions at a higher rate than the HEA projected target set for fulltime third-level mature student enrolment, but less than the target set for combined fulltime and part-time student enrolments. Students registered with disability services in participating third-level institutions exceeded the 2006 target projection set out by the HEA.

Finally, the training needs of student counsellors (n=23) were surveyed in order to equitably address the counselling and support needs of non-traditional students at Irish third-level institutions. The majority of participating counsellors identified a need for further training on working with students from the refugee community and students with disability. The latter referred in the main to enhancing work with students with mental health difficulties. Over three-quarters of participating counsellors identified a need for further training in working with students from the traveller community. Training needs often reflected the desire for counsellors to learn more about cultural norms and educative experiences of students from diverse communities, such as the refugee and traveller communities, in order to inform service provision when addressing the needs of non-traditional students in attendance at student counselling services.

While the results reported in the present chapter begin to quantify the participation of non-traditional students in third-level education and comparable rates of student counselling access during their attendance, a further source of information on how best to address non-traditional students counselling and support needs involved asking such students directly about their experiences and suggestions for change. It is to the students themselves that this report will now turn its attention.



05



# FIRST-YEAR IN COLLEGE:

## The experience of mature students

*Daire Gilmartin*

This study focused on investigating the specific, individual experiences and counselling support needs of seven mature students who were in their first year in college, having gained entry to Trinity College via the Trinity Access Programme (TAP). TAP targets students who have been educationally disadvantaged due to their socio-economic circumstances. Four male and three female mature students, ranging in age from their late 20's to late 50's, volunteered to take part in a semi-structured interview. Six out of eight participants were married or cohabiting. Five participants reported having dependent children.

The verbatim transcripts of seven individual, semi-structured interviews served as the data for an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (e.g., Smith & Dunsworth, 2003; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith, 2004). In addition, the participants were asked to share their own specific suggestions as to how student counselling services could be of benefit to them, or future students like them.

All of the participants reported a very unique experience of their first year in college and encountered many challenges along the way. However, despite their various struggles, participants were very positive about their college experiences to date and the impact of these experiences on them. Five Master Themes emerged from the data and were described under the broad headings of:

- Choice (restricted and expanded)
- Personal Impact
- Social Comparison
- Coping
- Support
- Positivity

Each Master Theme will be discussed in turn, exemplified by quotes from participants' transcripts. Pseudonyms were used when reporting findings to protect the confidentiality of participants.

### THEME ONE: CHOICE

As can be seen from Table 14, the first Master Theme 'Choice' highlights how, over the years, many of the participants' life circumstances restricted the choices or opportunities available to them. However, in later life and for various reasons their choice-base expanded greatly.

**TABLE 14:**  
Constituent Themes identified under the Master Theme 'Choice'

Restricted choice	Expanded choice
Early School Leaving	Educational Opportunities
Negative School Experience	Older Children
Cultural Expectations	Life Experience and Maturity
Financial Commitments	More Support Available
Disability	Employment Prospects
Alcoholism	
Depression	
Parental Illness/Bereavement	
Young Children	
Drug Addiction	

The following extract from an interview with "Martin" gives a flavour of experiencing 'restricted choice':

*"There was no option, the option for me to come to college at that stage, after school, just did not exist. That was just, it wasn't even thought about. My parents wouldn't have been able to afford it....It just, I was so disillusioned, I equated education with the education system that I had just come through and*

*I thought there was no way I was going to commit four more years of my life to that rubbish..."* ("Martin", Interview D).

An example of 'expanded choice' due to changes in life circumstances can be seen in the following extract from "Robert's" transcript:

*"Well I wouldn't have been able to go back to education two years earlier when my children were still going to college. I was still supporting them. So really it's only in the last 3 years that they have gone away and because I got the redundancy I was able to pay off the mortgage and so there were a few things there that made it possible for me to be able to do this".*

("Robert", Interview C.).

## THEME TWO: PERSONAL IMPACT

A number of Constituent Themes were identified under the Master Theme of Personal Impact. Many such constituent themes related to competing demands placed on mature students. For example, "Linda" reflected on juggling third-level demands with parental responsibilities:

*"... with regards to studying time, you see the kids [younger students] all hanging around. The minute that lecture is over, I'm gone. I'm either collecting a kid, I'm delivering a kid, because they're all boys and it's very rough where I live ... I try to keep them in as many things as possible. I have them in karate, I have them in GAA, I have them in the football. So I'm either bringing them or collecting them. No it's very... I do be meeting myself sometimes".*

("Linda", Interview G)

This impact was similar for "Martin" where he described challenges in balancing college work with family responsibilities:

*"You're trying to balance the subjects and the topics yourself. Finding that balance is difficult enough, but then you have to find the balance with your family, kids, friends, social life and that is really, really difficult. When you want something so much, you know you want to succeed in this, sometimes you become, well I know I do and I know a couple of people, you just become very obsessed with college itself and it's very easy to do that to the detriment of everything else".*

("Martin", Interview D)

"Martin" also discussed the personal impact on his relationship with his wife as a result of attending third-level education:

*"...I mean my personal relationship, my home relationship with my wife was really stressed as a result of everything that went on last year, to the point of serious, you know we were talking about splitting up..."*

("Martin", Interview D)

"Sarah" also reported stress in being more absent from family life as a result of attending third-level education, but recognised that her decision to further her education provided a sense of personal happiness for her:

*"Personally I'd say home life is a bit more stressed because I'm not around as much, but it would be more stressful if I was at home all the time, if you understand what I mean 'cause I wouldn't be happy".*

("Sarah", Interview B)

## THEME THREE: SOCIAL COMPARISON

It emerged in this study that as participants described their experience of first year in college, they compared themselves with other people and with themselves in the past. "Robert" reflected on his feeling of difference in comparison to younger student peers:

*"Mm, well as a mature student you are a bit of a novelty. I mean most of the people who are in my class are in their late teens and 20s, there are some mature students but they wouldn't be any more than 24 or 25... The social interaction, there is definitely a sort of novelty about you, you feel a bit sort of odd. But other than that... I think most mature students would be faced with the same oddity".*

("Robert", Interview C)

"Rachel" described some difficulties in navigating friend's reactions to her decision to attend third-level education:

*"...some of my friends have reacted badly, some of my friends that never went to college; they think that I'm too good for them now. Without me ever changing a bit, they just think "oh you think you're too good for me now" and it's not that, it's just that I haven't been going out".*

("Rachel", Interview H)

For “Linda” there was a noticeable difference in communication styles and language which set her apart from younger student peers:

*“Even the language, even speaking the language, there’s definitely two codes. We speak in one, they speak in another. They don’t know what I’m saying either. I was, if I’m having a conversation, what they would take fifty words to say, I could finish it in ten”.*

(“Linda”, Interview G)

“Rose” expressed worries about her ability to succeed in third-level education following a number of years out of full-time education:

*“...I think as somebody who is coming back to, from being the last time in school other than doing courses, coming back to full time education from so long that you worry, and if you are heading to your first year exams, that you’d be wondering were you up to it, were you up to the mark, could you make the grade in third level”.*

(“Rose”, Interview F)

#### THEME FOUR: COPING & SUPPORT

All of the participants spoke about how they coped with their return to education and who supported them with this major life-transition. The quality of this support was also discussed by many of the participants. “Linda” spoke about changes in familial support. In particular, she noticed a shift in parenting roles with an uptake of additional duties by her partner due to “Linda’s” third-level educational timetable:

*“...he [husband] would have not been impressed at all, was pushing me when I got the leaving cert, thought that was brilliant and when I got a place in Trinity [TAP], “aw that’s brilliant go there”, until he seen how much work went into it and how much work he had to do. He’s coming from work now to do my job...right down to parent teacher meetings; he had never been at one, never needed to. Now he has to do all them, confirmation meetings, communion meetings, I done everything, I don’t do any of them anymore...”*

(“Linda”, Interview G)

In terms of support on campus, “James” discussed the importance of support from fellow-mature students:

*“...there’s a crowd of us. We’ve kind of formed a kind of nucleus, there are other ‘matures’ who we’ve kind of gotten to know as well, so they kind of we keep an eye, you know we keep lecture*

*notes. You know if you hadn’t seen somebody, you know a guy called “Jack” you know he hasn’t been in lectures, what’s going on, has anybody seen “Jack”, who has his number, send him a text or something and find out what’s going on”.*

(“James”, Interview E)

Support from student counselling services were also mentioned. However, “Rose” expressed concerns about the inflexibility of opening hours, which may not suit mature students:

*“...I told her [disability officer] about my daughter and she suggested that I should go to the counsellor and that and I went over one day. But you know, all universities must be the same, you call on people and their hours are up on the door and they don’t suit the hours that you want, so I didn’t bother”.*

(“Rose”, Interview F)

#### THEME FIVE: POSITIVITY

A number of constituent themes were identified under the Master Theme of Positivity. In line with the findings of Metcalf (1993), who reviewed the literature pertaining to the experience of mature students attending higher education institutions in the UK, all of the participants in this study were positive about their educational experience despite the inherent difficulties involved. Participants to a greater or lesser extent seemed to gain a huge sense of personal satisfaction and joy in pursuing their educational ambitions, as “Rose” so enthusiastically shared:

*“It’s [college] not something that I jump up and down about or get excited about. It’s something that is internally deeply satisfying to me. It’s not like you’ve won the lotto or that you jump up and down or, it’s just something that pleases me greatly and that I’m very satisfied with. It’s nothing that I’d brag about or anything, it’s just something that I just really feel very good about and I am very happy doing it”.*

(“Rose”, Interview F)

“James” viewed his experience of third-level education as providing opportunities and choices for him to pursue life-goals:

*“...it [life] has well for me it’s in the process of changing. It has in obvious ways, just my daily life has...I’m happier, I am happier. I’m not frustrated as much, I’m doing something I enjoy it’s interesting, I’m doing something for myself, I’m not just working to earn, to earn money if I want to eat... Yeah I’m not trapped anymore, yeah I feel like I’m working towards something as well, the goal is a degree, hopefully in a couple of years time and*

*then after that maybe who knows, I've got the opportunities, I'm going to have choices, like maybe I'll carry on do a masters or maybe a PhD at some stage".*

("James", Interview E)

"Rachel" commented on her experience of third-level education as providing her life with more meaning through the opportunity to contribute positively to her community:

*"...I would have the same sort of mindset as a lot of people who would go on to say, on to heroin like, very sensitive people who just, who don't want to cop out, you know. And I'm sort of thinking well I could do that [become a health professional] now, you know and this that and the other and put something back. So in this regard that has changed me, I never thought I'd be able to do something like that, I always thought, I don't know, I think my life has more meaning than when I was a [names the job]...I didn't have a passion in life as such and never even really thought I had one but now I sort of do, you know, so that's good".*

("Rachel", Interview H).

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

The seven participants in the study were asked to give suggestions on improving college life and support services for mature students. The following is a summary of five specific suggestions offered.

### **1. PERSONAL CONTACT**

A number of participants recommended that third-level student counselling services be more pro-active and personal in their interactions with mature students. Many of the participants stated that they were aware of the presence of a student counselling service in their college, however a number of them stated that they were not sure exactly what the service offered them or where it was located. The participating mature students in this study suggested that student counselling services could make personal contact with them by introducing themselves at an early stage in the mature students' entry to third-level institutions.

One of the participants made a further suggestion for mature students on the TAP foundation course, stating the possible benefits of introducing student counselling services near the end of the TAP programme so that students are aware of the support that is available to them when they enter their first year of college. As she stated, while people are in the TAP programme there is quite a lot of support available, but when students enter the third-level institutions following access programme completion support is not as strong.

Many of the students warned against an over-reliance on a singular method of advertising student counselling services. For example, some participants stated that college counselling services often make contact via e-mail with regard to practical skills workshops. However, students may become so accustomed to these e-mails coming through to their e-mail account that they delete them without reading the content. Another student said that she is aware of many mature students who do not know how to access their e-mail accounts so they do not even receive the information that is being sent to them in the first instance.

### **2. TIME-MANAGEMENT**

Many participating mature students in the research reported the utility of skills-based, practical workshops in order to enhance educational achievements during third-level. However, some concerns were expressed with the fact that due to competing educational and familial demands mature students were often too busy to attend the workshops advertised by student counselling services. For some students the times did not suit them as quite often they have a lecture or tutorial that clashed with the times of the workshops. Some of the students suggested that if these workshops were held in the evening time, for example after 4.00pm they might be in a better position to attend. For example, one person stated that she might be able to go home and collect her children from school and bring them home, before returning to attend a workshop in the evening time. As mature students have so many other time commitments the timing of workshops is crucial when considering appropriate avenues for support.

### **3. FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS**

Changes in familial roles and relationships as a result of one person's decision to attend third-level featured regularly in the present research. Suggestions to focus on relationships were made by participating mature students. One of the participants suggested that couples counselling be made available to mature students. This could be offered in the evening time where needed so that partner's who work during college hours could attend. He reported that many people's relationships suffered as a result of returning to education and that he had seen people's marriages breaking up as a consequence. People were not sure where to get support in this instance. Similarly to Norton, Thomas, Morgan, Tilley, & Dickens (1998), this participant suggested that the person intending to become a student should be invited into third-level institutions with their partner in advance in order to be informed of the challenges and potential strain that student life can put on relationships, and consider what supports are available for them if the strain does begin to get overwhelming. For TAP students this consultation could occur while people are on the TAP programme.

#### 4. COMMUNICATION

The importance of information sharing and support for mature students on campus was outlined in the findings of the present study. One participant suggested that a specific mature student office be set up that would have regular hours and a dedicated staff team who students could get to know over their years in college. This suggestion supports what Lynch (1997) recommends in terms of colleges establishing a properly resourced support office for all types of non-traditional students. Recently in TCD a mature students' officer was appointed and a participant suggested that this officer could be a very good channel of communication between mature students and the counselling service.

#### 5. TRAINING

Identification of the counselling and support needs of mature students necessitates further training for third-level staff. One participant suggested that tutors within college may need further training with regard to the specific needs of mature students. Training will also be required for student counselling services in order to inform service provision.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGE COUNSELLING SERVICES

Based on findings from an analysis of participants' transcripts, it is apparent that mature access students have varying needs compared to the traditional student body. These comprise feelings of isolation, inadequacy and insecurity often relating to their place in the unique and unfamiliar cultural environs of higher education, and in relation to their potential to achieve and progress in college. These kinds of issues can impact on the individual student in various ways depending on their personal circumstances and can cause them and their significant others a great deal of stress. This in turn can exacerbate the student's difficulties in adapting to college life.

The author of this study has suggested that counselling services consider developing a more pro-active approach to their work with mature students who are entering third-level education via an access programme. There follows a number of specific recommendations based on the research findings:

- Provision of an induction programme for students who enter an Access programme, such as the TAP programme, which indicates possible difficulties students may encounter while in college and what student counselling services can offer them in terms of support, especially during their first year in third-level education. This induction could also involve partners and provide advice on the potential difficulties that

students involved in personal relationships may encounter, as a result of this return to education.

- The option of couples counselling would be a valuable addition to individual counselling for students who are encountering serious difficulties in their relationships as a result of their return to education.
- The development of a training programme for tutors dealing with mature students. This programme could involve basic counselling skills, details as to what the counselling service can offer students who are in difficulty, and practical information about the unique needs and difficulties mature access students may encounter
- Further and closer liaison with the staff and student involved in the access programme so that workshop times may be organised at more suitable times for the students. Again this is particularly important for mature students when they enter their first year of third-level education. This closer liaison could also involve the dedication of a specific counsellor with responsibility for meeting with the mature student group, so as to create a consistent and personal link with this cohort.
- The present research recognised the benefits of creating a central mature student support centre. Such a facility where mature students can meet and interact with one another could lessen feelings of isolation for some students. It could also be an access point for people looking for information about services or advice that is focussed on mature students' needs, in particular those entering third-level through an access programme.

While the current research involved a small number of participants on a specific access programme in Trinity College, findings from the present study echo the results of previous research outlined in Chapter One. Mature students appear from the literature to encounter a number of unique challenges in balancing third-level education and personal goals with broader familial responsibilities. Student counselling services are in a position to provide support and will continue to play an important role in maintaining many mature students participation in third-level education.

# 06



# THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS

## from disadvantaged backgrounds at Third-level

Sonya Walsh

This study investigated the experiences of six young students, aged between 18 and 20 years, from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who were in the first year of an undergraduate degree at Trinity College Dublin. Participants were evenly divided in terms of gender, with 3 male and 3 female participants volunteering to be interviewed. All six participants were affiliated with the Trinity Access Programme (TAP), which works to improve access to higher education for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Generally students on the TAP programme will have attended second-level education at a school that is designated as “disadvantaged” and typically there will be no history of parental attendance at third-level education.

The present research was interested in exploring the supports that young students from socially disadvantaged areas may need while accessing and participating in third-level education and identify the possible implications of such support needs for student counselling services.

A semi-structured interview was used to collect data on the participants' decisions to come to college, their experiences while there, the stresses and challenges they experienced while attending the access programme and the supports which they felt were necessary to progress in third-level education. In addition, participants were asked about their perceptions of counselling and what they saw as the potential barriers to attending student counselling services.

The data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (e.g., Smith 2004). The following Chapter provides an overview of ten Master Themes emerging from the study, followed by the implications of such findings for student counselling services.

### 1 The Decision to Attend University

*“It was always kind of inevitable that I would go to college”*

Thoughts about the possibility of continuing education after second-level completion emerged as a recurring theme in the data. All

participants expressed that they had ambitions to further their learning after secondary school. For all except one of the six participants this ambition involved a strong desire since childhood to attend some form of third-level education. One participant commented, *“I don't really know what my decision was to come to college, yeah, I suppose since I was little I always thought I'd go to college”*. Another participant stated, *“it never really entered my head not to go to college....really I think it was just always something I'd do”*.

### 2 The Role of Parents and Family

*“They pretty much just said like they always wanted me to have the best education I could have”*.

Parental support appears to have been a consistent experience of the participants in this study. All the participants reported that their parents were encouraging of their decision to attend third-level education. It seems as though the parents' focus on their children continuing in education was related in some way to parents own lack of third-level qualifications. As one participant put it, *“they never furthered their education and they kind of always had a big emphasis on the children to go on and further their studies”*. The message these parents appear to have given their children is that education is a way out of socio-economic disadvantage. They seem to encourage their children to choose alternative paths than the situations they themselves are in. This idea is exemplified by one participant who explained, *“my Mam and Dad were very eager that I kind of got a new route, because they seen what they had to do and how they had to work, like breaking their backs for like all the years”*.

However, participants also reported that while their parents were encouraging of education, they did not experience pressure to attend university. Many of the participants viewed their parents and families as a source of support during their attendance at the access programme. The sense that the family is always there seems important as one of the participants who lives at home stated, *“I mean if my family weren't there and they weren't supporting me through it I just couldn't do it”*.

### 3 Second-level Peers

*"I know one person in UCD, like a friend of a friend but like most people I know wouldn't have gone on to universities."*

In terms of peers from secondary school a difference emerged in the data between the participants from urban areas and those from a rural background. Two of the participants were from rural areas and currently living away from the family home, while the remaining four participants were from Dublin and still residing with their families. The participants from rural areas reported that many of their peers attended third-level education. One participant recounted that "most" of his classmates continued to higher education, while the other said, *"it was a very competitive and highly academic year so it was definitely the acceptable thing to do"*.

For the participants from urban schools, the story was quite different. All were in the minority in attending third-level education. One participant proffered, *"I think there's two people out of my whole year that went to university"*. This experience seemed common to all the accounts. Another participant stated, *"there was probably forty say in my year in secondary school and out of the forty, I'm the only one who came to Trinity"*. One participant had experienced feelings of "stigma" about attending Trinity, while another had been called a "swot" because of his university aspirations. However, the same participant went on to say, *"there was no malice or anything like that...actually a lot of them were supportive"*. Again this seemed common. None of the participants reported having encountered any malicious feedback from their peers. However, attending university did set them apart from their school friends.

There is a sense of the participants feeling in some way different to their peers from home. One commented on how her life at university set her apart: *"it's very hard like because they're all at home and they're doing things together"*, she added, *"it is hard because it is like you're kind of split in two"*. Another participant spoke of how she perceived herself to be different from her school friends:

*"they've no expectations really in life, and it's sad because I have a lot of expectations for myself and I look forward to getting my degree and going into the job of my choice and the fact that I'll be able to change if I don't like it, whereas they're just stuck"*.

While all the participants reported that they were maintaining the important friendships with people they went to school with who did not attend third-level education, a sense is evident of them being somehow different from their peers.

### 4 The Role of Trinity Access Programme (TAP)

*"TAP have just been wonderful. Any problems that I have, I just need to knock on the door over there like and help is always there"*.

All participants in the study referred to the role that TAP had played in helping them make the transition to third-level education. All spoke positively about the support they received through TAP. This support was perceived on several levels including financial advice, service provision and personal support. As one participant put it, *"TAP bends over backwards to give you support with everything."*

Possibly the most important factor of the TAP experience emerged as the friendships that developed by virtue of attending an access course. Every participant referred to the relationships they had established with people they had met in the TAP programme. They perceived these relationships to be valuable and enduring. One of the participants commented, *"I loved the TAP year and I made so many friends...that are my best friends now...I'm closer to some of them than I would be to people from home."*

The participants in the study appeared to identify themselves as "TAP students", and related positively with other students from the TAP programme. The sense of other TAP students being *"in the same boat"* or *"pretty much in the same situation as me"*, was expressed by many of the participants. Having an affiliation with TAP seems to have provided a sense of security and belonging to participants. In the words of one participant, *"if I didn't do TAP, I probably would hate college because you would feel left out."*

Due to the nature of the TAP programme, friendships develop between students from diverse faculties. This diversity appeared to enhance the sense of belonging for participants. One participant referred to the friends he'd met through TAP as being *"like the snowball effect, it's just getting to meet more and more people"*. He also commented proudly, *"I can't walk up or down campus without meeting someone from one of the foundation courses or direct entries...it's impossible without getting stopped"*. As outlined earlier, many of the participants would not have had peers from second-level school also attending third-level education. The potential for these students to feel isolated or lonely is clear. One of the effects of the TAP programme seems to be to ameliorate this possible sense of isolation or difference, by providing an instant peer group with which to identify.

TAP students share more social demographics with each other than they may perceive with their overall third-level peers, therefore it is not surprising that there is a felt sense of identity within the group

and that they encourage the sense of a TAP network on campus. However, having the TAP cohort from the start is not without some peril. Many of the participants reported that they felt less inclined to mix with other students or to make efforts to build relationships with classmates because of the TAP relationships they had formed. As one participant said, *"I suppose the one thing, the negative to that would be you don't feel such a burden to get to know your own class"*. This is echoed by another participant who said, *"I haven't really made an effort with people outside [TAP]"*. Still another reported, *"I really spend more time hanging out with my actual friends I made from TAP or whatever, I pretty much...they're in the same situation"*.

The natural kinship, which the participants feel for other TAP students is understandable. However, a tendency to avoid mixing with students outside TAP may exacerbate the 'us-them' feeling described below. Interestingly, participants from rural settings did not experience the same exclusivity in their TAP relationships; while they maintained the friendships they made in TAP, they also built friendships with other students. This may be related to the fact that they live away from the family home and are consequently exposed to a wider variety of people.

## 5 'Us/Them': The experience of difference at college

*"At first I felt like I didn't fit in because you just, probably because of the way I talk and there were just the way I act, I just sound different"*.

A sense of being different from their peers at third-level was a recurrent theme in the data, both explicitly and implicitly. This feeling was stronger for the young people from urban backgrounds. Whether the participants had directly experienced negative feedback because of their backgrounds, all those from urban schools expressed a sense of being different due to social class. One participant commented, *"as far as I could see, everyone seemed to be more middle-class and everyone I ended up talking to in the beginning like they all seemed to be, gone to [names private Dublin schools] or they were all captain of the school rugby team"*. Another participant felt, *"they think you're stupid because of where you're from"*.

One participant spoke of the differences she perceived between her and her classmates:

*"it's completely different, like peoples lives, I mean you just hear them talking and its like, Easter break or whatever you know you're off for like a couple of weeks and people come back and they're like 'oh well I went skiing and you know', I'm like 'well I did a bit of shopping in [names suburban shopping centre]', like it's totally different"*.

The words "they" and "them" are used a lot in reference to people outside of TAP. The idea of having to explain yourself or justify yourself in some way to "them" was also evident. One of the participants spoke about "defining yourself as a TAP student" and identified this as a major stressor in his college experience. He struggled with how to tell people about his TAP status and how much information they needed in order for them to understand the reasons for the existence of TAP. He felt if he didn't explain there was a fear of being "misunderstood" or that people would "make assumptions about you". The idea of having to explain oneself is reiterated by another of the participants. She recalled explaining the difficulties faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds to a tutorial group:

*"after me telling them they couldn't believe it, but before it they just had one view, a one-way view of it, but if you actually tell people and explain it to them I think they'll understand your situation"*.

Some of the participants also reported a sense of difference in coping with the academic side of college. While all felt they were academically able for their courses, some reported that they did not feel they had the same resources as their peers due to their backgrounds. One participant spoke about her frustration at not getting the same grades as her peers. She attributed the disparity to her lack of "cultural capital", and went on to say:

*"I'm answering the question correctly, but the fact that I'm not using fancy words he's deducting marks from me, so I feel like I'm being punished because of where I come from"*.

While the participant acknowledged this situation would improve with more time and more reading, the sense that she was academically different to her peers remained.

## 6 The Right to a College Education

*"I think the fact that I done a Leaving Cert and I got a first in a certificate course at Trinity last year justifies my place here."*

The issue of deserving a place in third-level education appears in the data, and seems to be exacerbated for those participants who did the TAP foundation course. The foundation course is a transition year between school and college and the results of the course are used to gain a college place. Some of the participants in the study referred to the accusation of having attained a place at college by the "back door". The necessity to deal with the attitudes of people who consider TAP the "back door" to university seems to be tied to the feeling of being different to peers and having to explain their situation.

While none of the participants expressed a felt need to justify their position at third-level, some did say they had at times felt the need to explain what one participant referred to as the “raison d’être” of the TAP initiative. As one participant points out:

*“you think how narrow-minded some people can be...you’re trying to explain to some people that may have gotten into college through spending thousands of euros getting specialist grinds or something and then they’re kind of saying that you got in the easy way”.*

The same participant went on to say, *“I had to work hard for the Leaving Cert that I got and had to go into work as well, and I had to do an extra year and then I had to work hard at that and stuff like that. It’s kind of a contradiction”.* This feeling of having in some way to explain or justify oneself is echoed by another participant:

*“you can’t just sit down and learn it out of a book, because when you can’t, they probably all had grinds, you can’t afford to get grinds, you can’t...afford to go to all the courses during the breaks and all that they go to and you, it’s like much more difficult, and then you have to work. I had to work in fifth and sixth year.”*

There is a sense in the data that although participants claim not to feel the need to justify their position in college, there have been times when they have felt compelled to exonerate themselves of the “back door” allegation and feel obliged to justify how they earned their place. Parity of esteem with their peers is not given in all cases for these students and on occasion they do feel the need to defend their positions at third-level institutions. Although they expressed the need to explain their positions to others, at times there is a sense that the participants understand their right to be at third-level. One participant, speaking about her felt sense of privilege to be at university elaborated:

*“I wouldn’t say that oh I feel lucky, like I do feel lucky but at the same time I think it should be more equal, I shouldn’t have to feel oh I’m so privileged to be here because I’m not from an advantaged area”.*

The sense of having the right to be at college is repeated by another participant, *“I don’t really care what people think about how I got into college because I just know like you know I could do better than them if I work harder than them now we’re at the same level”.* A further participant encapsulates his sense of deserving to be at university

in the comment that what matters is *“not the door you go in, it’s the door you go out.”*

## 7 Future Focus: Seeing the Bigger Picture

*“It means changing the whole path my life will take and people around me type thing and people that will come from me and the whole route forever”.*

One theme that emerged from all participants is their sense of third-level education as a step towards building a future. Participants unanimously saw education as an opportunity to change their life circumstances in a permanent way. One participant referred to the long term consequences of education, *“it’s kind of like my legacy will be my kids, they’ll have a father who went to college and university and then like that’ll be another step up for them, like something that I didn’t have and that’ll be passed on through the generations”.* This same generational effect was commented upon by another of the participants who said, *“my children, I’d never want them to be in my situation”.*

Throughout the data the sense that “furthering your education will get you further in life” is evident. The participants all seemed to hold a perception of education as a means to altering their current life’s circumstances, and their long-term futures. This future focus may be related to the sense of “expectations” from life that one of the participants mentioned she felt distinguished her from the people she attended secondary school with. There is a sense that this future orientation may be something which was instilled in the participants by the ethos of the family culture, as exemplified by one of the participants who said of the family:

*“they’ve always wanted the best for me and I think getting through third-level education and achieving a degree it’s just going to make my life easier for me.”*

## 8 The Meaning of Education

*“It’s given me the option...of just having what I want instead of just having to settle for second or third”.*

A theme closely related to the future focus outlined earlier is the sense of education meaning options. All participants spoke of how education ensured that they would have more choices in their future. One participant stated this clearly when he said, *“I’ve got huge options after a degree...there are so many options after a degree that you can create for yourself”.* Another participant simply stated, *“it means I’ll be able to do whatever I want when I come out of here”.*

The participants saw education as a means of opening up personal opportunities for them and potentially changing the future for their offspring. They also referred to the value of education in broadening one's awareness. Succinctly put by one participant, *"it changes your view of the world."* Another participant elaborated on this idea when she spoke of how without education one's worldview can be constricted:

*"because at the end of the day people in disadvantaged areas, their parents were never educated sufficiently and that's why they're in the situation that they're in. Education is the most important thing".*

She expanded on this point later when, in reference to growing up in a disadvantaged area, she said, *"that's your life, that's the way you were brought up and the way possibly your parents were brought up and all your family, all the people around you are in that little bubble and you don't understand, not that that's their fault, because I mean they've never been shown otherwise, they're not educated. You don't know where, you don't even know how to go about making things better if you're not educated"*.

## 9 Practical Challenges and Supports Needed at University

*"The way I see it, it can't be too easy. That would just like destroy the challenge"*.

Most of the participants expressed the same practical challenges as a result of being at third-level. Mainly, these challenges revolved around finances, academia and time management difficulties.

Attending third-level education presented the participants with financial challenges. In making the decision to attend third-level education, most participants reported having to consider whether they could afford to go. For students from rural areas, the financial consideration included which city they would attend a third-level institution in. Very practically the participants referred to concerns about the money they would use in a day when there was a time lag between lectures. One participant mentioned, *"some days like I just have to ring my Mam when she's in work and say like 'if I call down will you give me the money for the bus?' "*. In order to ameliorate their financial situations four of the six participants in the study held part-time jobs. While this does provide them with extra money it contributes to other difficulties, principally time-management issues.

Both participants who worked and those who didn't reported experiencing time-management difficulties. The reasons for these difficulties varied between participants. For some, holding down a

job and attending college full-time while being expected to study and have some form of a social life presented a real challenge. As one participant related, *"it is hard, because I mean like I still work and I have to come to college so it feels like all I ever do is go to college and then go to work and then go home and then go to college and then go to work"*. This sentiment was also expressed by another participant:

*"I'm having to work, I'm in college Monday to Friday and I'm working probably one or two nights during the week, and then Saturday and Sunday as well. I'm just finding it really tiring."*

For others the academic pressures of their courses cause time-management problems. One participant described his difficulty as, *"doing a forty hour week of lectures, and having to do study and do assignments, it really just felt like I was living in college and then into the library"*.

Other participants encountered time-management difficulties for social reasons - the tendency to get over-involved in social events. As one participant said, *"the only stress is what I've put myself under by getting involved in too many things."* For another participant it was a combination of all three factors which led to difficulties:

*"a few 'all-nighters' to get projects done and then work and college and then not a hugely active social life but because of the flat I live in there's something every night....so I kind of wore myself out"*.

Though the reasons differ a clear sense emerges from the data that balancing social life, academic life, and possibly work is a difficult task and can be stressful.

Another challenge that some participants referred to was the size of the classes. It appeared that the bigger the class size, the less the participants felt that they belonged. One participant commented, *"when I'm in the broader groups, like the five hundreds, they, I kind of didn't fit in, I felt like I didn't fit in"*. This feeling is echoed by another participant who said, *"once you're finished a lecture, like the people in the lecture you're never going to see them again until the next lecture, pretty much don't know their names, two hundred and ninety like or three hundred people"*. The larger class sizes seemed to have the effect of depersonalisation, making it feel harder to meet people and appearing more intimidating for participants in the present research. One participant referred to it like this:

*"I'm still kind of finding it stressful because it's so big and it's so daunting to come into somewhere like this, but it does need to be more personal I think to make you feel more at ease".*

The experience of college being daunting and impersonal may well be heightened for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who do not tend to have peers from school attending with them.

When asked about the supports they felt were required at college, most of the participants reported that they felt their needs were being met. All cited the value of friends as support, as one participant said, *"friends are always there....I must be one of the luckiest people, I know so many people"*. Family was also frequently referred to as a support. In addition, TAP was consistently quoted as a primary source of support with many of the participants referring to the diversity of their needs that were accommodated by the TAP staff.

## 10 Perceptions of Counselling

*"It doesn't really tell you how to fix things which is a good thing. It just sort of like walks you through what's going on so there's more support".*

All participants expressed the view of counselling as a listening service. They referred to it as *"getting out your thoughts and feelings"*, or *"somewhere to talk about your problems"*. Another said she felt a good counsellor would be someone *"who would be open and who would listen and be supportive"*. The understanding of counselling seemed to centre on the idea of having someone to talk to and not necessarily directive in orientation; *"I think it's probably...a huge part is just support not actual positive help"*. Participants relayed a diverse number of issues which they perceived would bring people to counselling, including relationships, depression, and academic issues. The most consistent factor mentioned by participants for initiating counselling was stress.

Regarding what might prevent people from attending for counselling, all participants believed that there was a 'stigma' of sorts related to counselling. Some participants felt that attending counselling might be difficult because it may signify an admission that there was something wrong; *"nobody wants to be like 'oh there's something wrong with me', nobody like actually wants to turn around and say that"*. This sense is reiterated by another participant who said: *"there's still a stigma about saying that you need help, I mean you're supposed to be strong and be able to get through with no help"*. Still another participant expressed a similar belief; *"you'd probably feel like you were a failure or something, or peer pressure, they feel like they're not being as...like they've failed somehow in comparison*

*to their peers or they had to go to someone else for help"*. The theme here appears to be the sense that attending counselling means asking for help and asking for help in turn implies weakness. Only one of the participants stated they had attended counselling. This participant spoke about the experience of telling people about it: *"Those people were like 'ah yeah, there's something wrong with your head'"*.

While he did not experience hostility he was aware of its existence, as he put it, *"it was all pretty friendly, but at the same time it [negative perceptions of counselling] was there"*. While this participant felt able to deal with this attitude, concern was expressed for other people who might be more susceptible to feeling stigmatised. Another reason cited why people might be reticent to attend for counselling was the fear of being judged, for example one participant commented, *"they're afraid people might think differently of them because they're going to counselling, their counsellor might think differently of them."* This sense was echoed by another participant who felt that people might be embarrassed or afraid of what the counsellor might think of them, they might feel too uneasy to talk openly:

*"you'd feel uncomfortable saying it, you don't want to be telling people and so you're bottling it up, that's what counselling is for...but you've got the hurdle to cross."*

Some of the participants suggested that the name counselling might be helping to perpetuate the problem. They felt that if the service contacted people under a different title they might be less anxious about attending:

*"if it was called something like oh, we're having such and such in the [names venue in TCD], just you know exam stresses or whatever, stuff like that"*.

Some participants felt that the way in which the service publicised itself in college was not sufficient. They criticised the fact that communication tends to be electronic. One participant commented, *"I mean like if you don't have, if you didn't use, if you never used computers before...if you don't get your e-mails, and if you haven't a computer at home to check all your e-mails then you constantly have to come into college"*. These participants seemed to feel that the exclusive use of electronic communication was biased against them. Another felt e-mail to be an inappropriate means of communication because in his experience people tended not to read all their mail; *"people half the time just delete the e-mails"*. These participants suggested that the counselling service needed to advertise more using posters and flyers around campus.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT COUNSELLING SERVICES:**

The participants in this study perceived a sense of 'stigma' around attending counselling. They expressed concerns about being "misunderstood" or being considered "crazy" if they attended, a perception that may make them less likely to avail of the service. In order to combat this perception it may be useful to engage in an educational campaign. This campaign could include information about what the service offers and also attempt to dispel the myths that surround mental health difficulties, emotional problems, and the nature of counselling itself. It should be aimed at the entire college body, inclusive of staff and students. The more transparency with regard to the function and the need for student counselling, the more understanding there may be. Understanding may help to dissipate stigma.

Due to perceptions of stigma surrounding counselling, some of the participants felt that the service might be more user-friendly if it didn't communicate with students under the title of 'student counselling'. They felt that if the classes and workshops offered were advertised using a different name, people might be more likely to attend. Alternative names suggested by the participants were "student support" or "student advocacy service". They also felt that communication exclusively via e-mail was not the best way for advertising services. One participant felt that it rendered the service less accessible to students who did not have a computer at home or who were not computer literate. Advertising by means of posters and flyers were suggested as an alternative means of communication.

The six participants in this study may not be typical of all students from socio-economically-disadvantaged backgrounds. They certainly have a lot of support from the TAP programme that would not be available to socio-economically-disadvantaged students who enter university via the CAO system. While participants in this study give a clear account of the difficulties they have faced thus far in third-level education, it is worth bearing in mind how much more these difficulties may impact on students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who do not have the support of TAP.

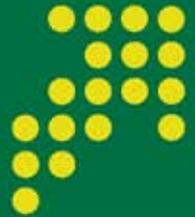
The data indicate that the participants in this study experience themselves as different from their peers in third-level institutions. However, they also express the sense that they are different from their peers at home. This lack of a shared sense of identity may result in feelings of social isolation. There is much evidence to suggest that a perceived or actual absence of social support is associated with higher levels of psychological distress (e.g., Brown, Alpert, Lent, Hunt

& Brady, 1988). It is necessary then for student counselling to make every effort to reach these vulnerable students. Such students may not in fact need counselling per se, but might benefit from a support group as they may find it helpful to meet people experiencing similar difficulties. The potential sense of social isolation these students might experience is relevant for a counsellor working with a client from this background. It may be necessary for the counsellor to assess a client from this background for perceived social support and to build up supportive resources with the client before engaging in intensive therapeutic work.

In terms of the sense of difference the participants recounted experiencing at college, the student counselling service could organise mixed groups to address this issue. Groups comprising representatives of the different strata attending third level could be arranged to air some of the issues surrounding access to education. Perhaps a discussion board of some form - either virtual or actual - could be instigated, to allow people to share their views on social issues and thus encourage transparency and communication between the groups.

On a practical level, the participants in the study expressed difficulty with both financial and time-management issues. Newton (2000) advocates that "students need to have skills to manage their daily lives" (p.14) and advises that educational support services design and deliver programmes to enhance self-management competencies. Specifically, he mentions time management, financial issues, stress, and relationships as areas where students may need to increase their management skills. The findings of this study would tend to support Newton's (2000) claims as to the needs of students. Programmes of this nature could be conceived and delivered by student counselling services.

# 07



# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The broadening of access to education has resulted in the profile of the Irish student population changing considerably in the last decade. While in the past the majority of those who entered third-level education were middle-class school-leavers, in future non-traditional students will form a larger proportion of the Irish student population.

Student counselling services were originally established to meet the needs of traditional students. The general expectation when third-level student counselling services were established was that only a small proportion of the total college population would avail of such services. As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, this expectation does not necessarily hold true for the non-traditional student population who frequently require a level of service which exceeds that of the traditional white, Irish, middle-class, non-disabled school-leaver. As numbers of non-traditional students accessing and participating in third-level education continue to rise, a significant strain will be placed on third-level counselling staff who are struggling to meet the growing and changing demand for student counselling and support services. Furthermore student counselling services will need to revise existing models of service delivery in order to incorporate changing needs within the student body as campuses diversify.

In order to address the needs of non-traditional students and tackle the implications of a rise in such student numbers for counselling centre staff, findings from the present research identified a number of areas for future service development and detailed commensurate recommendations for future action in order to improve existing services for students and staff. However, just as third-level institutions differ in terms of student numbers and available amenities, Irish student counselling services vary in size, staffing levels and length of time in existence. Moving into action may be more difficult for some student counselling services than others and adequate resources will need to be established in order to advance service delivery.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

Given the level of service provided by student counselling services to a diverse student population, a number of recommendations to improve existing service provision are important to report.

In order to create a more user-friendly model of service delivery, findings from the present research provided a number of practical suggestions for improvement.

- **Maximising promotional methods:** Difficulties in the over-reliance on singular methods of advertising services were a feature of qualitative reports from students in the present research. Recommendations for improvement included using multiple promotional methods, including advertising events or workshops in a student diary, using e-mail in conjunction with posters, billboard notices and flyers, and making information available both on the main campus and in other third-level buildings off the main campus area if applicable.
- **Using available networks of communication:** Third-level staff were considered as an instrumental link in passing information regarding student counselling service workshops and events to students and it was recommended that all third-level staff be informed and reminded about workshops and events available for students throughout the academic year.
- **Increasing service accessibility:** Due to the busy lifestyles of students, in particular those from non-traditional backgrounds who may be juggling a number of competing demands, the present research recommended that workshops need to be offered on more than one occasion and at a variety of times in order to promote more opportunity for attendance.
- **Reducing stigma:** The benefit of an educational campaign, with a target audience of both staff and students, was highlighted as a useful means to promote third-level counselling services. Such transparency was recommended as a way to dispel myths surrounding counselling while

bringing awareness of the types of support offered by student counselling services to students.

Another area identified for service development involves the establishment of a pro-active approach to address the needs of vulnerable students, including students from non-traditional backgrounds. International research draws attention to the fact that a number of distinct difficulties exist for non-traditional students. Qualitative findings in the present research echo international studies. Both groups of non-traditional participants in the present research reflected on third-level education as a way of improving life choices and future goals. However, attending third-level education was not free of problems. For participating mature students, challenges existed in balancing the demands of home life and academia which in some instances put pressure on relationships. Young students from socially disadvantaged areas reported a sense of feeling different from both previous school friends in their community and their student peers in third-level. Some participants felt the need to justify their place at third-level. While participants in the present qualitative research were provided with professional support and guidance while they accessed third-level education through the Trinity Access Programme (TAP), for many non-traditional students entering third-level institutions via the CAO route levels of support are different. The following recommendations were suggested for inclusion in counselling service delivery in order to address the needs of vulnerable students at third-level:

- **Promote students' self-management:** For all students entry to third-level education brings about change and new responsibilities in terms of self-management. Student counselling services can provide useful programmes in order to support this transition into third-level institutions, providing advice in areas such as financial budgeting, time management and stress reduction.
- **Provide outreach facilities:** An increasing emphasis in providing a pro-active service to all students involves the use of outreach facilities, with student counselling services visible as a resource on campus for supporting students with a variety of presenting issues.
- **Facilitate induction and orientation programmes:** Also recommended by research participants from TAP was the utility of providing an induction programme for students intending to enter third-level institutions in order to explore the challenges that lie ahead and inform such students of available supports on campus.

- **Offer a Consultation service:** In some instances students may wish to attend student counselling services for consultation, an offer which may be extended to the student's partner if applicable.
- **Facilitate support and integration:** In light of the vulnerability of non-traditional students to unique difficulties attached to attending third-level education, support groups and workshops promoting integration were service recommendations arising from the present research.

Students may also be accessing community-based services while in attendance at third-level institutions and in many instances warrant liaison between third-level counselling services and community agencies in order to provide continuity of care. This is particularly relevant for students with disability including individuals with mental health difficulties, the latter of which may attend student counselling and health services for their primary care needs throughout their attendance at third-level education. Findings from the present research made the following recommendations:

- **Create networks with community-based services:** The present report highlighted the importance of maintaining contact and liaison with community-based services, such as the Health Services Executive and voluntary agencies with specialist knowledge and expertise. Furthermore links to community groups for non-traditional student groups such as PAVEE point for travellers and the Psychology Service for Asylum Seekers and Refugees need to be established and maintained.
- **Make stronger service links on campus:** Maintaining links with alternative student support services and non-traditional student initiatives was also recommended to create a useful forum within each third-level institution and increase equitable service provision for non-traditional students.

The project brought about avenues for liaison between key stakeholders in educational access and participation. Links were established between the National Office for Equity in Higher Education and the Irish Association of University and College Counsellors (IAUCC). Recommendations included:

- **Maintaining a partnership approach in future initiatives:** The present research recommends that links are maintained between the National Office and IAUCC, in particular regarding future initiatives that aim to broaden access to third-level education in Ireland.
- **Establishing collaborative initiatives between Irish third-level institutions.** Higher education institutions in Ireland are varied on many levels, including size, resources and student numbers. As such research endeavours addressing the Irish student population would benefit from collaboration across a number of third-level institutions.

In terms of research completion, there is an obvious need to address gaps in uniform methods of data collection and clarify the inclusion criteria defining each non-traditional student group. Recommendations for improvement include:

- **The need to address methods of data collection:** Create uniform mechanisms for gathering data on attendance at counselling by non-traditional student groups across services in order to provide a clear account of service statistics and provide basis for cross-comparison of data in Irish third-level counselling services.
- **The importance of clarifying definitions of non-traditional student groups:** With regard to ongoing and future research initiatives on access for students from non-traditional groups, it is necessary to clarify the criteria used when defining non-traditional student groups. For example, when researching students with disabilities, consideration needs to be given to the fact that the term "disability" covers a number of presenting issues including physical, sensory, medical, mental health issues and learning difficulties.
- **Recognition of the need for further research:** Statistics were easier to gather on some non-traditional student groups than others. Data pertaining to students from the traveller and refugee communities were unobtainable and further research is needed in order to establish the level of current access and unique challenges for both of these groups in higher education.

Information was gathered from two groups of non-traditional students who participated in the present research (i.e., mature students and students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds). An often untapped source of information on non-traditional student counselling and support needs is direct experiences from the non-traditional students themselves. The present research recommended:

- **The importance of learning from students:** The utility of speaking directly with students cannot be over-emphasised. Consultation with non-traditional student groups and opportunity for feedback on existing service provision is an important step in gauging student-centred change. The present research recommends the use of focus groups or discussion boards in order to glean students opinions regarding access initiative and service provision.

Furthermore, the present research explored counselling centre staff needs in working with non-traditional students. A major recommendation for staff included:

- **Facilitation of staff training:** Part of improving service delivery needs to include training for staff. A number of desirable areas for future training, identified by student counsellors, are summarised in this report. Further work in this area is needed.

The present report aimed to investigate the counselling and support needs of non-traditional students in Irish third-level education. Findings show that such students are presenting with a diversity of needs throughout their access and participation in third-level institutions. Student counselling services operate as a primary support structure in addressing a wide range of issues faced by non-traditional students. While student support resources vary within third-level institutions, student counselling services will continue to look forward, striving to enhance service delivery in their commitment to provide counselling and support to all students, including those from non-traditional backgrounds in Irish third-level education.

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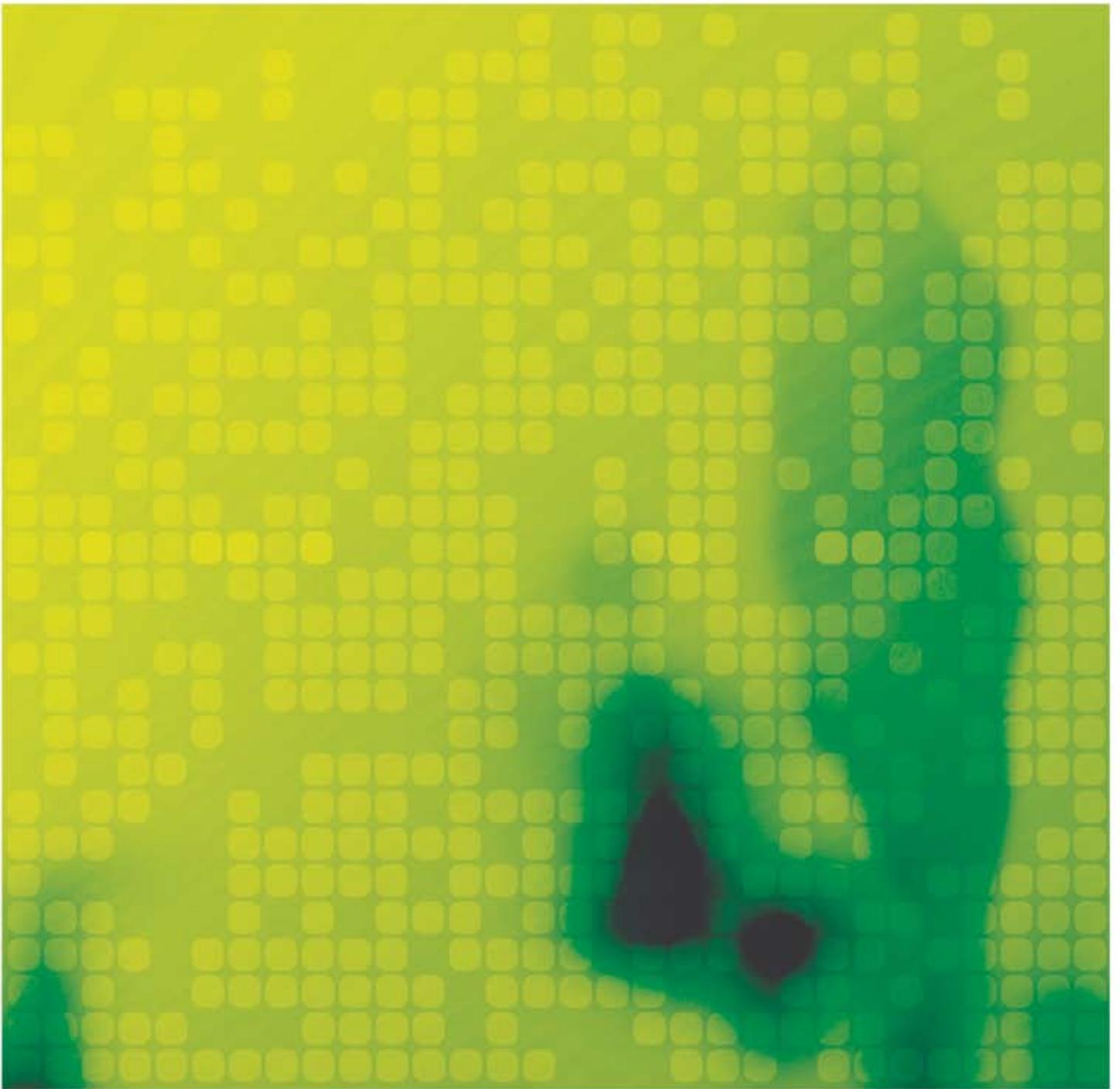
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