



# 'What Happened Next?'

The Employment and Further Study  
Experiences of Trinity Graduates of TAP 2002-2008





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## Executive Summary

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The promotion of access to third-level education for underrepresented groups is a key strategic aim for Trinity College. The Trinity Access Programmes (TAP) has worked across the Irish educational sector, for the last seventeen years to promote higher educational attainment among non-traditional groups in Irish society. In recent times, with the increasing number of students entering Trinity from non-traditional groups, the non-traditional graduate population has grown. To mark this development, in 2007, with the support of Nissan Ireland, TAP commenced a longitudinal research study exploring the employment and further study experiences of its graduates. The research investigates 'What Happened Next?' for the graduates, it is one of the first of its kind in an Irish context.

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The report provides an overview of the rationale for widening participation in Ireland. National and international research investigating the experiences of non-traditional graduates is also presented with the key theme of this body of research demonstrating labour market disadvantage experienced by non-traditional graduates. Strategies developed within the third-level and employment sector aimed at overcoming labour market disadvantage are also discussed with a view to informing programme development. 71% (171) of graduates participated in the research enabling TAP to explore graduate experiences relating to the following areas:

**Biographical Profile:** The majority of participating graduates in the research are female, Irish, and in their twenties. They come from families where the highest level of parental/guardian's education is primary level and where Non-Manual and Manual Skilled are typical forms of parental employment.

**Higher Educational Profile:** The majority of graduates entered Trinity College through the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR). The academic achievement levels of TAP graduates mirrored those attained by the graduate population of Trinity College, with a II.1 class of degree the most frequently awarded. Three quarter's of graduates would complete the same undergraduate course again if given the opportunity.

**Graduate Labour Market:** Approximately half of the graduates used the Careers Advisory Service (CAS) in Trinity College prior to completing their studies. Graduates recognised the importance of seeking careers advice at an earlier stage in their academic studies. The graduates indicated the labour market is increasingly competitive, and a lack of job security was a concern. Professional work experience and further qualifications are attributes which graduates indicated provide an advantage in the labour market. To the contrary of previous research, the graduates did not perceive that their age, geographical location or gender disadvantaged them in accessing graduate level employment.

**Employment Profile:** 75% of graduates were employed at the time of participating in the study. Those who were not employed were mainly pursuing further study. Graduates were most frequently employed in the Non-Market sector, predominantly working in the Education system. Employment which matches their academic interests, provides professional development and work experience as well as financial security appeals to the graduates. The earnings of the participants were found to be in line with national starting salaries for third-level graduates, however it was noted that Mature Students earned less than Young Adults. A 9% increase in the rate of unemployment for Mature Students when compared to Young Adults was found.

**Attainment of Further Qualifications:** 57% (97) of graduates had progressed to postgraduate or further education/training. 12% (12) of graduates have pursued PhD qualifications. Graduates most frequently returned to Trinity College to pursue further study, the reputation of the university and a sense of affinity to Trinity were the reasons for this trend. Skills development, networking, the fulfilment of an academic ambition, and the ability to gain a competitive edge in the labour market are the main reasons why graduates pursued further qualifications.

## Programme Development

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The graduates were asked to help inform programme development in TAP. They highlighted that programme development should encompass career guidance, skills development and work placement or shadowing opportunities. The importance of seeking careers advice and guidance during undergraduate studies was also highlighted.

## Conclusion

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The report outlines that in each phase of the study TAP graduates have been effective at establishing traditional graduate careers and/or progressing to traditional postgraduate or professional qualification courses. The graduates demonstrated a strong sense of what they wanted from their careers as well as knowledge of the attributes that enhanced graduate employability. Though some difficulties were evident for graduates, the overall progress made is encouraging, and to the contrary of research conducted in this field, there is little evidence that the graduates experienced widespread disadvantage in the labour market. Rather, the graduates demonstrated that they gained a heightened sense of what they want from their professional lives, and a desire to continue with their studies. The graduates also clearly articulated that they draw upon their experiences, skills, and qualifications as Trinity graduates, in the main, to their advantage. They are, therefore, a testament to the success of widening participation initiatives in Trinity College.

## Chapter 1

### Rationale for Widening Participation

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#### Introduction

Widening participation for groups in society under-represented in higher education is a key strategic focus for the Irish government (HEA, 2004; OECD, 2006a; DES, 2003; Osborne, 2003; Trant, 2003). Governmental and educational policies are increasingly aimed toward the development of a society characterised by mass higher educational attainment, as well as one which embraces a philosophy of lifelong learning (EGFSN, 2007; Skilbeck, 2001; DES, 2000; Walshe, 2009).

From the perspective of social justice, it is acknowledged that education makes a fundamental contribution to individual wellbeing, societal and economic development. Increasing the numbers progressing to third-level enhances the diversity of the student body making it more reflective of the widening demographic of Irish society (CSO, 2009a, CSO, 2006b; Skilbeck, 2001; Skilbeck and Connell, 2000).

In Ireland, education is free for all citizens, with the formal education system based upon meritocratic principles. It is assumed that ability, coupled with effort are all that is required for academic excellence within this system (Tovey and Share, 2007; O'Connell et al, 2006). However, national research has demonstrated that inequalities both in participation and in outcomes remain a feature of the Irish educational system. Participation at all levels is affected by multiple socio-biographic characteristics such as age, social class, disability, gender, and ethnicity, which interlink to affect student motivation and academic outcomes, resulting in educational disadvantage (Byrne, 2009; Smyth and McCoy, 2007; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1996; Lynch, 1989).

Analysis of the rates of progression to, and participation within higher education, based on the social background of students has consistently demonstrated that individuals from higher socio-economic groups<sup>1</sup> are over-represented at third-level, with participation in some groups at saturation point (O'Connell, et al, 2006; Clancy and Wall, 2000). In contrast, for students from the lower socio-economic groups, the reverse of this trend has been evident (Thornhill, 2002; Clancy, 2001), though in recent times this situation has begun to improve for some of these groups (O'Connell, et al, 2006).

From an economic perspective and from projected demographic fluctuations, it is acknowledged that the over representation of higher socio-economic groups at third-level will necessitate the continued development of widening participation initiatives (CSO, 2009a; EGFSN, 2007). It is further recognised that in order for Ireland to remain competitive within the global economy, it is essential that Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) recruit from a wider spectrum of students, with government policies enabling and

supporting this process (Forfas, 2009; Smyth and McCoy, 2009; HEA, 2004; DES, 1995). The role of the higher education sector in educating and contributing skilled graduates to the workforce is increasingly important particularly when the economic and social challenges facing Ireland at present are considered (O'Connell et al, 2009; IBEC, 2008).

#### Institutional Perspective: The Trinity Access Programmes (TAP)

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Since 1993, Trinity College Dublin has worked to ensure a significant increase in participation at third-level for those who for social, economic, and educational reasons have not yet realised their full educational potential (TAP, 2009a). TAP is now in its seventeenth year of developing and delivering programmes designed to promote higher educational attainment to socio-economically under-represented groups in Irish society. Through ongoing programme development TAP has provided pathways to third-level for these students. In recent times, TAP has widened its scope to work in partnership across the educational sector and with families, communities and businesses in achieving these aims.

Promoting access is a key strategic goal for Trinity College with the growth of access within the College being affirmed by annually increasing progression rates, as well as a higher than average retention rate<sup>2</sup>. At the conclusion of the 2008/09 academic year, four hundred and ninety (490) individuals were registered as TAP students in Trinity. A further three hundred and twenty three (323) students had achieved their third-level qualification. Together, these figures are testament to the success of access as an initiative within Trinity College and the increasing relevance of widening participation to third-level in Ireland.

#### Research Context

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A wealth of knowledge investigating widening participation to higher education has been produced with the bulk of this focused on the experiences of non-traditional students within the higher education system (Archer, 2002; Archer et al, 2002, Bowl, 2003; Ibid, 2001; Bamber and Tett, 2000; Ibid, 1999). These studies mainly explore two interrelated themes, which reflect the developmental stages of widening participation initiatives. Research has identified that there are personal, cultural, social, educational as well as financial barriers to participation for under-represented groups in gaining entrance to third-level (O'Connell et al, 2006), as well as the experiences of these groups when participating within higher education (Callaghan, 2000; Green and Webb, 1997; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1996). The findings from these studies have contributed to programme development in higher education institutions working to promote diversity in the third-level system.

<sup>1</sup> The children of higher-professionals and farmers in particular are over-represented in the third-level sector, with participation in these groups reaching in some cases, saturation point.

<sup>2</sup> Based on statistics for the academic year 2008/2009, the retention rate calculated for TAP undergraduate's stands at 89% which is higher than the national average of 83.2% (Morgan et al, 2001).

Alongside the strides made within widening participation thus far, a new area for research has simultaneously developed. The question of 'What Happened Next?' for non-traditional graduates is an emerging area of research both in the Irish and international context (Loxley and Kenny, 2009; Staunton, 2009; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Barber et al, 2005; Connor et al, 2004; Teichler, 1999; Pitcher and Purcell, 1998). This is an indication of the progress made within promoting and delivering access to higher education. Where previously the focus of access research was to explore equality of participation relating to student progression and retention, this has now moved toward exploring *equality of outcomes* for these graduates namely in relation to their undergraduate, labour market, and further study experiences (Staunton, 2009; Brennan and Shah, 2003).

### TAP Graduate Destinations: Current Research

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In 2007, the Trinity Access Programmes with the support of *Nissan Ireland* undertook to explore the experiences of TAP non-traditional graduates from Trinity College. The study explores the employment and further study experiences of graduates of Trinity College who originally entered TCD through the Trinity Access Programmes. The findings from this study aimed to inform and assist programme development in TAP. The report provides a detailed profile of the experiences of TAP's graduating cohorts from the academic years 2001/02 to 2007/08 in making the transition from student to graduate. Graduates from the 2001/02 to 2006/07 cohorts were included in Phase One of the research, and graduates from the 2007/08 cohort included in Phase Two and Phase Three.

A questionnaire was designed in line with research instruments used in similar studies (Teichler, 2007; Gash and O'Connell, 2000; Purcell et al, 1999; Connor and Pollard, 1996) it contained mainly quantitative indicators as well as open-ended questions and was designed to assess graduate experiences pertaining to employment and further study. The instrument was piloted, subsequent revisions were made and the re-drafted questionnaires were issued. This process resulted in a 71% (171) rate of response.

The report which follows explores the experiences of TAP graduates from these cohorts in relation to the following areas:

- **The socio-demographic profile**
- **The meaning of a higher education:** participation in retrospect
- **The graduate labour market:** graduates early preparations, expectations and experiences
- **The employment profile:** rate, type, sector of, and satisfaction with employment
- **The socio-economic profile:** trends in socio-occupational classification
- **The attainment of postgraduate/further study:** rate, type and motivating factors
- **Trinity Access Programmes Alumni Strategy (TAPAS):** model of good practice for programme development.



## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

A mass higher educational system enhances the demographic profile of students participating in third-level studies and also impacts the supply of graduates to the labour market. Research demonstrates that the graduate labour market is becoming increasingly diverse; graduates may be older, from a wider range of socio-economic and/or cultural backgrounds (Barber et al, 2005). It is also acknowledged that the experiences and opportunities accessible to graduates from 'non-traditional' backgrounds differ to graduates from more affluent backgrounds. In this section of the report, a review of research into the graduate labour market experiences of non-traditional graduates is presented. While the majority of the research is from a UK context, the findings relate to the experiences of graduates who accessed third-level through widening participation routes and are relevant to non-traditional graduates within an Irish context. The experiences of graduates also depend on the wider economic climate at any given time. Therefore an overview of the opportunities available to Irish graduates during the Celtic Tiger era is outlined, concluding with a discussion of the economic challenges which now dominate the labour market (O'Connell et al, 2009).

Enhancing the diversity of the student body in third-level has both educational and labour market policy implications as a diverse student body contributes to a more socially diverse pool of labour market entrants. It is also acknowledged that employment opportunities within global labour markets have become more diverse, and graduate forms of employment encompass a wide variety of roles and sectors, beyond those of the traditional established graduate professions (Elias and Purcell, 2004a). Widening participation practitioners have acknowledged that success within a more fragmented and diverse labour market requires that graduates from all backgrounds, particularly non-traditional, are adept at enhancing their employability. The challenges posed by the employability discourse to the practice of widening participation are therefore discussed, drawing on studies which demonstrate that disadvantage in the graduate labour market is disproportionately experienced by graduates from lower socio-economic groups. The development of programmes within the widening participation arena in higher education, aimed at enhancing the employability of these graduates is also outlined.

#### Recent Trends

##### Irish Economy and Graduate Labour Market

The economy in Ireland over the last decade saw an unparalleled level of growth due in part to attractive tax incentives for multinational companies resulting in increased foreign direct investment (IBEC, July 2009; Smyth, 2007;

National Competitiveness Council, 2001). This, together with the growing and widespread availability of low interest credit within international markets, resulted in a massive increase in demand for home ownership thus facilitating a housing boom. As well as this buoyant subsidiary market in many other sectors within the Irish economy, resulted in widespread employment opportunities (CSO, 2007a; Ibid, 2007b).

Ireland had reached 'full employment', with approximately 300,000 jobs created in the economy between 2001-2006 (Behan et al, 2007; Barrett et al, 2001). Corresponding skills shortages were a noted feature of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy (Barrett, 2009; Bruff, 2005), with an ongoing and growing demand for graduates to fill vacancies particularly within the subsidiary markets of the boom time economy (Behan et al, 2007; EGFSN, 2005). Throughout this period, the need for higher level skills was reflected in the importance placed on the expansion of the higher education system (Davia et al, 2009; EGFSN, 2007).

However, this level of economic growth persisted for longer than was realistically sustainable, with the first indications of a downturn noted as early as 2001 (Forfas, 2009; Ibid, 2002; ESRI, 2008). A slowdown in economic activity meant that Ireland faced significant national debt<sup>3</sup> (CSO, 2009d; Ibid, 2009c; CSO, 2008a), and rising unemployment<sup>4</sup> (CSO, 2009d; Sheehan, 2009; Government of Ireland, 2009; Quinn, 2009). In contrast to the last decade, Ireland has now moved from an economy where demand for all types of labour, particularly employment synonymous with third-level graduates was high, to one where skills shortages are no longer a significant feature of the Irish labour market (FAS, 2008).

However Ireland's position within the global marketplace is paradoxical. As a relatively small nation with an open, trade dependent economy, its global reputation is essential for harnessing future economic growth (ESRI, 2008). Yet, due mainly to high rates of inflation, with correspondingly high wage and living costs, Ireland's international reputation has been undermined. The supply of highly educated and skilled graduates is increasingly recognised as a key mechanism by which Ireland can rebuild its economic profile, and regain its global competitiveness (Barrett et al, 2009; EGFSN, 2009; FAS/ESRI, 2008; Ruane, 2009; Behan et al, 2007). It is argued that sustained and strategic investment in 'human capital' through an expanded higher education system which contributes to an educated, knowledgeable workforce is the key mechanism by which to facilitate this process (Department of Taoiseach, 2008; Keese, 2006; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2006; Forfas; 2007c). To meet this demand the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs forecasts that the progression rate to third-level needs to increase from 55% to 72% by 2020 (EGFSN, 2007: 92).

<sup>3</sup> Estimated at €1.69 billion (CSO, July 2009)

<sup>4</sup> Placed at 9.2% (CSO, 4 February 2009)

## Graduate Employment: Trends in Ireland

Throughout the last decade opportunities for the majority of labour market entrants were plentiful, particularly for third and fourth-level graduates (HEA, 2008a). Wise (2007) demonstrated that Irish university undergraduates were highly optimistic about the opportunities open to them, with only 13% pessimistic about their future opportunities. The earning potential of Irish third-level graduates was one testament to the value of a third-level education, with graduates standing to earn as much as 60% more than those with a second-level education (OECD, 2006b). Graduates in Ireland had excellent prospects for employment over the last decade. The *What Do Graduates Do* report series conducted annually by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) detailed the rate, sector and distribution of graduates within further study and employment in Ireland. Only three percent of the *Class of 2004* were still seeking employment nine months after the completion of their final year exams (HEA, 2006). While the Class of 2005 also enjoyed excellent rates of progression to employment, with 89% of PhD recipients engaged in employment within nine months of receiving this award (HEA, 2007). However more recent times have marked a decline in graduate prospects (HEA, 2009).

Profiling the distribution of graduates by employment sector, the HEA report pertaining to *The Class of 2005* (HEA, 2007) found graduates most frequently entered Non Market Services<sup>5</sup> and approximately 40% of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences graduates were employed in this area. The Business, Finances and Industry service sector employed approximately 30% of graduates. This distribution of graduates by sector was similar for the *Class of 2006*, where again graduates most frequently gained employment in the Non-Market Services sector (accounting for 33.4%); and the Business, Finance and Insurance sector (representing 26.8%). The Health sector meanwhile accounted for 22.1% of those employed (HEA, 2008a). This distribution of graduates in Non-Market Services sector increased for graduates from the Class of 2007, where 46.3% of third-level graduates were employed (HEA, 2009). Though the data showed graduates benefitted from a buoyant economy, the existence of a gender pay gap between male and female graduates was noted as an ongoing feature of graduate employment in Ireland. The most recent data available indicated for example, that Irish graduates most frequently earn €25,000–€28,999 in starting salaries (HEA, 2008a). However the experiences of the Class of 2004 demonstrated that males most frequently earned €25,000–€28,999, while female graduates earned approximately €4,000 less (HEA, 2006).

Prospects for Trinity College graduates mirror those for graduates nationally. Available data profiling TCD graduate prospects demonstrated high levels of employment between 2004 and 2007. The number of graduates who gained employment peaked in 2004 standing at 63% of that year's cohort, with 29% pursuing further studies (TCD, 2004). The data also highlights that although Trinity graduates had high rates of employment overall, the rate of participation in

further studies increased during this period (Ibid, 2005; Ibid, 2006; Ibid, 2007). These trends mirror findings from the HEA which demonstrated increased progression rates to fourth-level study and a decline in the number of primary degree graduates employed, an indication that graduates had more options open to them during buoyant economic times (HEA, 2008a).

## Employability in the Knowledge Based Economy: Investing in Human Capital

It is argued that a mass higher education system which produces a highly educated, skilled, adaptable and resourceful workforce will enhance Ireland's capacity for research and development, which will in turn contribute to economic growth through increased productivity (EGFSN/NIFSG, 2008). Human capital development is the process by which it is recognised Ireland can enhance its ability to regain its competitiveness on a global stage (Sexton et al, 2004; HEA, 2008b). An economy built upon the accrued intellect of a highly educated population is seen to provide an intellectual positional advantage within the global marketplace through what is referred to as a knowledge based economy (KBE) (David and Foray, 2002). This type of economy is driven by indigenous innovation (Downey, 2003; HEA, 2002). Advocates of knowledge based economic development estimated for example that 64% of the world's wealth now consists of human capital (Neef, 1997: 2). In this respect, higher educational attainment in Ireland is a valuable commodity, which while providing individuals an opportunity to develop personally, it also enables them to reap financial reward as well as to contribute to wider social and economic good (Mjoset, 1992).

However, this strategic ambition of converting intellect and innovation into real economic dividends is problematic due to the fiscal challenges facing Ireland. Though increasing the rates of progression to third-level as well as the research, development and innovative capacity of the state is a clear forerunner to social and economic progress, the current financial climate indicates that there will be limited employment growth and job opportunities in the short to medium term, with little or no significant growth in the economy predicted until at least 2012 (Bergin et al, 2009). Previously where there was widespread demand for all forms of labour, the now limited, and declining number of employment opportunities have also affected the options open to third-level graduates (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Rae, 2008).

Critics of knowledge based economic development argue that one effect of the globalisation of Irish and international economies is that a degree is no longer a sufficient precursor to obtaining graduate level employment (Brown and Scase, 1994). The graduate labour market that was once characterised by linear career progression with the 'job for life', associated with an elite higher education system has changed (Pearson et al, 1997; Elias and Purcell, 2004a). With

<sup>5</sup> This category includes the Health and Education sectors.

an increasing supply of individuals possessing a third-level qualification, graduates must proactively develop their career management skills during their undergraduate study in order to secure professional employment (Sexton, Canny and Hughes, 1996; Brown, 2000).

To succeed in such a market, graduates need to be able to develop and demonstrate their range of transferable skills in order to enhance their attractiveness to prospective employers, and essentially enhance their 'employability' (Dearing, 1997; Curry et al, 2003; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004). There are many diverging definitions of employability. It can be viewed as a process to ensure graduates obtain satisfactory forms of employment over the course of their working lives (Watts, 2006; LTSN, 2003). From this perspective employability is defined as:

*...Being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work, more comprehensively employability [is the ability] to move self sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employability (Hillage and Pollard, 1998: 2).*

However employability can also be defined more holistically as the possession of a set of attributes; individual, social, cultural and educational which employer's value. Furthermore, through this process, graduates are able to reflect on their backgrounds and personal attributes when seeking employment.

*[Employability can be defined as] a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations (Yorke, 2004).*

One of the wider benefits of participating in higher education is that students, through independent learning in an academic environment, develop a range of 'transferable skills'. Transferable skills are generic skills developed through learning, particularly within an academic environment. Analytical and critical thinking skills, computer literacy, presentation skills, enhanced efficiency and time management skills, research skills, as well as project management skills contribute to a transferable skill set (Curry et al, 2003). These skills are also seen to be further developed by student engagement in the wider social and cultural dimensions of university life (Connor, 2001; AGR, 2008). Collectively these attributes make an essential contribution to a student's ability to be employable once they graduate from third-level education (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Pierce, 2002).

## Labour Market Disadvantage, Widening Participation and the Discourse of Employability

From a philosophical viewpoint, higher education is coveted because of its position as a forerunner in the critical analysis, as well as the development, of society. These principles, together with the academic nature of teaching and the intensified form of learning are seen to benefit the student holistically (Morley, 2001). Though the enhanced ability to gain employment is an added advantage of a higher education, a focus on 'training' students for the labour market does not sit easily with the ethos of third-level education. Therefore, the alignment of a mass higher education system with the employability agenda whereby the third-level sector could become the training ground of highly skilled employees has been challenged (Craswell, 2007; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Fevre, 1992).

Advocates of the employability agenda however argue that it allows students to take sole responsibility for their future particularly pertaining to employment opportunities (Harvey, 2005; David and Foray, 2002). The possession of skills which enhance employability, as well as the need to be a self-sufficient, proactive graduate job seeker are seen as key attributes for success within knowledge based economies (Jacobsson, 2004). With the graduate labour market becoming increasingly fragmented, competition for skilled employment is high and graduates need to be readily adaptable (Couppie and Mansuy, 2000; Brown and Scase, 1994).

However, critics of the employability discourse oppose these features of the knowledge economy (Morley, 2001). They suggest that this situation in practice, works to further disadvantage students from non-traditional backgrounds. Disadvantage is particularly experienced when, as graduates, these groups seek to enter the labour market on an equal footing with other graduates from backgrounds where university participation is an established norm. This focus on the employability of graduates, is seen to reinforce existing inequalities faced by certain social groups (Brown, 2003; Hesketh, 2003; Heath and McMahon, 1997; Brown and Scase, 1994). From this viewpoint, employability is not just about demonstrating a set of attributes, it is also about the continued existence of attitudinal and institutional barriers which disadvantage some groups (NCC, 2001). Research exploring the initial transition experiences, as well as the first destinations of university graduates has highlighted that labour market opportunities are not experienced in the same way by all graduates (Purcell et al, 1999; Robertson and Hillman, 1997).

The ability to benefit from labour market opportunities is not solely based upon the supply and demand fluctuations of the wider economy (NESF, 2006). Rather, opportunities are bound up within the socio-economic and cultural attributes of graduates and whether they are seen to possess, or exhibit

cultural capital (Roberts and Campbell, 2006; Connor, 2001; Blundell et al, 1997; Drew and Heritage, 1992). The extent to which disadvantage previously experienced within the education system affects graduate opportunities for non-traditional students has been the focus of research mainly undertaken within the UK (Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Layer, 2006). These studies have explored employability within the context of widening participation and the equality of outcomes for graduates from non-traditional backgrounds (Blasko et al, 2002).

This body of research demonstrated that while increasing the rate of students progressing from non-traditional backgrounds into higher education is one process by which to address educational disadvantage, this does not mean that equality of opportunity or equality of outcome has been achieved for these groups on receipt of a third-level qualification. Instead, educational and socio-economic disadvantage is a multi-dimensional experience which extends to the graduate labour market, affecting the experiences and opportunities of groups (Conlon and Chevalier, 2002). The extent to which graduates are affected by their educational, social, and ethnic backgrounds, where age, gender and disability also compound the propensity to experience disadvantage within the graduate labour market are themes explored across a range of studies (Blasko et al, 2002; NESF, 2006; Purcell et al, 2002; Redmond, 2004).

As previously outlined, the experience of labour market disadvantage extends to third-level graduates from certain social groups previously identified as educationally disadvantaged. These graduates utilised widening participation initiatives to gain access to higher education. The attainment of a third-level qualification is a clear indication of the success of widening participation. Although strides have been made in levelling the playing field for non-traditional students, there is room for further development of widening access initiatives within the labour market.

The available body of research demonstrates that graduate disadvantage is experienced in a complex manner where one form of disadvantage can be compounded by another (Naylor et al, 2002; Kenton and Harrison, 2004). Labour market disadvantage can be understood to affect graduates at three key transition points within the educational sector and labour market, namely during university participation (Moss, 2005; Redmond, 2004; Chevalier and Conlon, 2003), during the early transition period from student to graduate (Staunton, 2009; Green and White, 2007; Blasko et al, 2002); and in participation in the graduate labour market (Purcell, 2002; Conlon and Chevalier, 2002; Egerton, 2001a). An overview of research investigating non-traditional graduate disadvantage is now presented in accordance with these three key themes.

## University Participation

Redmond (2004) argued that experiences of third-level study influence future labour market opportunities for non-traditional graduates. Graduates from non-traditional families for example, are less inclined to engage in extra curricular or cultural pursuits while at university. Moss (2005) reiterated this point, arguing that evidence of involvement in social and cultural pursuits while at university are indicators of cultural capital and are viewed favourably by employers. Blasko et al, (2002) demonstrated that the type of degree studied can affect graduate employability, with vocationally orientated degrees seen as more valuable.

The type of university attended is also a factor in labour market success. Universities with a prestigious reputation are seen to be valued more by prospective employers. This is particularly evident within the UK where graduates of 'Post '92' universities or 'new universities'<sup>6</sup> are seen to have fewer labour market opportunities than graduates from more elite establishments (Chevalier and Conlon, 2003; Naylor, 2002; Hesketh, 2000). Chevalier and Conlon (2003) found that graduates of 'Russell Group' institutions earn up to an additional 6% wage premium for males and 2.5% for females compared to graduates from 'new' universities. Academic attainment patterns also affect labour market experiences with graduates from ethnic minorities more likely to obtain a lower class of degree (Connor et al, 2004). Furlong and Cartmel (2005) also showed how graduates from lower socio-economic groups, who obtained either an ordinary degree or a third class award, were more likely to be employed in non-graduate occupations. Degree subjects studied also affect labour market experiences of graduates, depending on wider economic demand and the extent to which the degree is seen by employers as vocational (Naylor et al, 2002; LaVelle et al, 2000).

## Transition to the Labour Market

Making the transition from university to professional life is not an instant occurrence. Research indicates that it can take over two years for graduates to become established in terms of identifying the types of employment they would most like to engage in, and finding employment to match these criterion (Brennan, 2000; Elias, 1999). The transition experience from final year student to university graduate is also believed to differ for graduates from non-traditional backgrounds (Opheim, 2007). Studies investigating transition experiences highlight that these groups are less likely to utilise careers services, and, when they do uptake services, it is typically at a later stage within their academic experience (Harris, 2001; Morey et al, 2003). They are also more likely to seek advice from informal networks, thereby reducing their ability to establish an effective career seeking strategy (Connor, 2001; Hawkins and Gilleard, 2002). Furthermore, research evidence reveals that some graduates (particularly Mature Students) deselect themselves from applying for certain jobs. It is argued that this is due to their propensity to have a lower sense of

<sup>6</sup> 'New Universities' refer to former polytechnics which were given university status after the Robbins Report (UK) on higher education. These universities were also called 'post 1992' universities.

self-confidence within the graduate arena (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Pitcher and Purcell, 1998). One study found that 68% of Mature Students and 60% of graduates from a minority ethnic background perceived that there were fewer opportunities available to them (AGR, 2001). Ironically, self-assurance and assertiveness are considered to be key indicators of a graduate's employability, where self-confidence and self-reflection are attributes (Cooper et al, 2002).

Non-traditional graduates come from families where participation in higher education is not the norm. They may be the first in their extended and immediate families to progress to university (TAP, 2009b; Clancy, 1995). In this regard, these graduates cannot draw upon the cultural capital inherited from their families or communities to enable them to navigate the labour market (Thomas and Jones, 2007). The level of guidance around their university participation from their families is limited, particularly for networking or for insights into professional graduate careers. It is argued that graduates from traditional families are better able to draw upon these cultural resources associated with their social background (Watts, 2006; Brown, 2000; Hills, 2002; Brown and Scase, 1994). This is further compounded if students are not engaged with the wider social and cultural pursuits available to them at third-level. Student engagement in these activities would at least provide an opportunity during their time at university to establish valuable networks as well as enhance their curriculum vitae (Purcell et al, 2002; Connor, 2001).

## Labour Market Participation

Once graduates have made the transition from higher education, participation within the labour market is also affected by disadvantage. Recruitment strategies used by graduate employers have been identified as presenting institutionalised barriers for non-traditional graduates. Barber et al (2004) identified that techniques used by employers to screen and short list graduate applications are unknowingly biased to candidates from non-traditional backgrounds. An example of this practice is the pre-requisite of the 'essential 2.1' which excludes those who do not obtain this final award from being selected (Cooper et al, 2002).

Other screening practices can also disadvantage non-traditional graduates in the application process. Graduate recruiters often receive thousands of applications for a finite number of vacancies, particularly during economic decline (Hauser, 2009). A study which audited the screening practices of one hundred graduate employers identified that 62% of companies screen by academic grade (Barber et al, 2005). Successful graduates were then assessed further on their academic performance at second-level. This process can mean that graduates with relevant third-level qualifications are disqualified on the basis of their prior educational experiences. In the UK for example, recruiters have been known to screen by degree awarded, followed by A-Level scores (Naylor et al, 2002; Pitcher and Purcell, 1998). This practice can inhibit the progress of Mature Student graduates who, by their nature

may have poor second-level qualifications (Purcell et al, 2002; Egerton, 2001a; *ibid*, 2002).

The culture of organisations are also seen to present potential barriers for non-traditional groups, particularly Mature Students (Stewart and Knowles, 2000). Studies have demonstrated that graduate recruiters tend to promote themselves as companies with youthful, dynamic, and highly competitive environments which tend to view graduates within the traditional mindset - typically in their early twenties, and coming from more affluent backgrounds (Hills, 2002; Brown and Scase, 1994; Harvey, 2003; Purcell et al, 2007).

A lack of awareness of the increasing diversity of the graduate labour pool on the part of employers has been determined as an issue (CIPD, 2005; Hills, 2002; Connor et al, 2004). Recruiters indicated that graduates from non-traditional groups are not presenting with the right characteristics. For instance, the lack of relevant work experience evident on the curriculum vitae of these graduates is an issue (Harvey et al, 1997; Harvey, 2005; Purcell et al, 2002). Paradoxically, while Mature Students may have a wide range of experience in employment due to their prior participation in the workforce, the nature of this employment is not usually relevant to the type of work undertaken in graduate professions and so is not considered valuable (Goodman, 2005). Graduates from non-traditional groups, particularly Mature Students, are likely to be less geographically mobile due to a wider range of personal and familial roles and responsibilities (Purcell and Hogarth, 1999).

The advantages of graduate level employment are multi-fold. It typically allows the employee to engage in a wide variety of tasks, enabling them to draw upon their intellect, talent, skills and abilities within a work setting (Teichler, 2007). The potential for self-development, as well as a sense of achievement are attributes of professional forms of employment typically associated with a third-level qualification (Purcell and Pitcher, 1996). Jobs undertaken by graduates are generally more financially rewarding, with better opportunities for promotion and career progression (Purcell, 2002). Past studies reiterate that the employment and economic returns associated with third-level qualifications are not as pronounced for graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds (Brennan and Shah, 2003; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005).

Typically graduates can command higher salaries than individuals with a lower level of educational attainment (UUK, 2007). However, when the income/salary levels of graduates from non-traditional groups are compared to those from more affluent backgrounds, studies have demonstrated that non-traditional graduates tend to earn less (Brennan and Shah, 2003; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Egerton and Parry, 2001). A UK study undertaken by the Council for Industry and Higher Education for example found that there was a 16% differential in the earnings of graduates from professional families and those from lower socio-economic families (Conlon and Chevalier, 2002).

The income gap was also identified by research conducted by Brennan and Shah (2003) which showed that after four years in the labour market, graduates from lower socio-economic groups earned approximately £1,500 less than their counterparts in higher social groups. Purcell et al (2003) highlighted this difference in relation to age, with earnings for graduates in their early twenties projected to grow at least five percentage points per year faster than graduates who gain a degree at age 32 (Ibid:17). The authors also demonstrated in previous research that earning premiums, associated with the attainment of a third-level qualification develop over a 10 to 15 year period, as graduates gain more experience. Hills (2002), however noted that non-traditional graduates tend to have higher earnings expectations as graduates, which may be unrealistic for early labour market entrants. This expectation may be further attributable to the lack of cultural capital associated with non-traditional groups, where they may over estimate the financial return from investing years in higher education (Redmond, 2006).

Fragmented career progression has also been highlighted as an issue for graduates from non-traditional backgrounds, particularly those who entered third-level as Mature Students (Egerton, 2001a; Ibid, 2001b). Purcell et al, (2002) investigated the impact of a mass higher education system and increased diversity on the graduate labour market. They argue that from a supply perspective, the 'graduate labour market' previously associated with third-level graduates in their early twenties, predominantly male and from affluent backgrounds is no longer the case. Furthermore from a demand perspective the labour market itself can no longer be viewed as a homogenous system where graduates can obtain a 'job for life' with relative ease. Instead graduates are faced with an array of new and niche graduate occupations which may take longer to progress into.

Underemployment is a feature of all labour markets and pertains to a situation whereby a graduate is employed, but not in a role best suited to their skills and abilities (Brynin, 2002; Elias, 1999; Purcell et al, 1999) A mass higher education system results in an increased number of individuals being able to benefit from third-level participation and from a supply and demand perspective, there is a risk of over-supply and therefore under-employment. Proponents of the employability agenda, however, argue that rather than increasing under-employment, a wider range of employment opportunities for graduates are provided within a more fragmented graduate labour market. The need for graduates to be able to move efficiently within this market is increasingly important, particularly for non-traditional graduates (Purcell et al, 1999; Purcell et al, 2007; Purcell and Hogarth, 1999).

## Enhancing Employability through Widening Participation

There is an ongoing debate between the discourses of human capital development and employability, with critics arguing that the employability agenda compounds the likelihood that a graduate will experience disadvantage in the labour market (Pearson, 2000; Brennan, 2000). However, practitioners and advocates of widening participation initiatives recognise that graduates need to become self-sufficient career starters. These graduates need to be able to reflect on their social and cultural backgrounds, drawing upon their life experiences when seeking employment (Thomas and Jones, 2007). Therefore, particularly within the context of the United Kingdom widening participation practitioners have established strategies to enhance the employability of non-traditional students (Layer, 2006; Layer et al, 2002; Layer, 2002). In the main these strategies incorporate one or all of the following strands.

Typically strategies focus on enabling students to recognise the value of their life experiences to date. They also assist them to develop the skills they have accumulated during third-level study and encourage students to engage with the careers services at an earlier stage in their undergraduate studies. Other strategies include connecting students with successful non-traditional graduates in their field. Facilitating students in up-taking relevant work experience during their undergraduate studies is another key strategy. Each strategy enhances a student's ability to become more employable, thus easing the transition from third-level to professional employment (Harvey, 2003; Blasko et al, 2002).

## Personal and Career Development

A focus on career development is an important means by which students can effectively prepare for the challenges of the labour market. Previous research has demonstrated that graduates who are adept at marketing their social, cultural, educational, and work experiences, are more efficient at navigating the labour market and demonstrate more success at an earlier stage (Ward et al, 2006; Brown and Scase, 1994). The use of Personal Development Planning (PDP's) is seen as an effective tool for students to reflect on their life experience and the influence these experiences have on their university participation and professional life (Miller and Martin, 2007). PDP is defined as:

*A PDP is a structured and supportive process undertaken by a learner to reflect upon their own learning performance and/or achievement, to plan for their personal, education and career development. It is an inclusive process open to all learners...* (QAA, 2009).

It has been recommended that PDP be a compulsory part of the undergraduate and postgraduate student's curriculum to help students to set goals, identify where they could further develop their skills, reflect on their personal experiences of both university and part-time employment, and assess their life experiences. This process is seen to enable students to articulate what they learn from these collective experiences when seeking professional employment. As such, the value of PDP as a mechanism for students to enhance their employability has been acknowledged (Ward, et al, 2007), particularly for non-traditional students (Miller and Martin, 2007; Harvey et al 2002; Harvey, et al, 1997).

While the use of PDP has remained optional in some universities, the most effective use of these tools occurs when incorporated in both the student's undergraduate curriculum and in work placements (Little, et al, 2001; Corey and Lea, 2008). Trinity College currently provides PDP as an optional resource for undergraduate students to develop their skills. The Careers Advisory Service (CAS) also work in conjunction with academic departments within the College to provide students with the option to attend careers seminars and careers evenings, to establish a mentoring connection and have the opportunity to engage in professional employment opportunities during holiday periods (TCD, 2009c).

While an integrated PDP system across the HEI sector in the UK has been seen to enhance student employability, previous studies also highlighted that non-traditional students would benefit from more targeted careers advice (Kidd and Watts, 1996). In the UK the Harris Report identified that non-traditional students have a tendency to under utilise career services provided in third-level institutions (Harris, 2001). Furthermore, when non-traditional students do use career services, they are more likely not to make contact with career services until their final year of study (Hills, 2002; Watts, 2006).

Research in the field of widening participation has highlighted that students could benefit from specific sessions such as interviewing and developing job search techniques when seeking professional forms of employment (Purcell et al, 2002). It is acknowledged, however, that voluntary uptake can be low across all student groups (Watts, 2006). It is also recognised that targeted initiatives for specific groups can be problematic due to resource constraints, increased student numbers, and a potentially negative effect of targeting students who do not want to be treated differently. These issues can further hinder uptake from non-traditional students (AGCAS, 2003; Morey et al, 2003).

### Establishing a Mentoring Connection:

As non-traditional graduate populations increase, the opportunity to match non-traditional undergraduates with graduates engaged in professional employment increases. Universities in the UK have recognised the value of establishing a mentoring link between undergraduates and non-traditional graduates. Drawing from their experiences in professional graduate level employment, graduates are better

placed to inform current undergraduates of professional graduate life and to offer them advice, guidance and support.

One prominent example of an effective mentoring programme is the *Minorities Ethnic Recruitment, Information, Training and Support (MERITS)* project, which established an online mentoring system for non-traditional students, encompassing work placement opportunities for first year university students<sup>7</sup> (Layer, 2006). A further initiative of this kind was established by the London Metropolitan University<sup>8</sup>, referred to as the *Law Graduates Employability Network: LAGREN*. Students were mentored during their undergraduate legal studies by professionals in legal settings. Approximately 40% of students who participated in this strategy gained employment. An increase in the use of career services was also noted among the targeted groups (Nicholas, 2002).

A number of initiatives have been established in the UK with the aim of promoting informed career decision making amongst second-level students relating to their decisions regarding higher education participation as well as course choice and career prospects (Thomas and Jones, 2007). One of the most prolific examples of strategic interventions in widening participation is the *Pathways to Professions* programme initiated at the University of Edinburgh. This initiative aims to increase the number of school pupils from under-represented groups progressing to professional careers in Law, Medicine and Veterinary Medicine by providing a series of introductory workshops, clinical placement and work shadowing days, as well as advice and guidance from mentors in these fields (University of Edinburgh, 2008).

### Enhancing Employability through Work Experience

To meet the wider financial costs of attending third-level, students, particularly non-traditional students engage in part-time employment alongside their academic studies (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Blasko et al, December 2002). While part-time work has been associated with lower grade attainment (CIPD, 2006b), it is now an acknowledged feature of the undergraduate student experience (Little et al, 2001; Harvey et al, 1998; Harvey et al, 1997). It is also viewed favourably by employers in instances where the type of experience gained is relevant to the graduates' course of study and to the employers business. Graduates who can demonstrate relevant work experience are likely to be viewed favourably by employers due to their ability to articulate skills developed from the experience, as well as exposure to professional working environments (Neil et al, 2004; Blasko et al, December, 2002).

The establishment of work placement initiatives for non-traditional graduates has therefore been common practice in enhancing employability for these groups (Yorke and Knight, 2002). While placements which are developed alongside the undergraduate curriculum are seen as most beneficial, the opportunity to engage in a paid work placement is deemed

<sup>7</sup> See [www.agcas.org.uk/merits](http://www.agcas.org.uk/merits)

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/directions/previous/issue4/lagren.html>

valuable for HEI's who do not have an ethos of embedding placements within their wider academic curriculum (Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2007; Lees, 2002).

Students who complete placements have been noted as returning to university more motivated, focused, and as having established valuable future contacts in the labour market (Harvey et al, 1998; Mason et al, 2006). Furthermore, Bowes and Harvey (2000) found a correlation between graduates work experience status and their employability regardless of the subject(s) that form the basis of their qualification. Mendez (2008) also demonstrated that students who completed a work placement as an integral part of their course, attained a higher grade for their degree.

The value of work experience placements does not benefit students alone, it is also a means by which employers can assess the suitability of the candidate undertaking the placement, as a potential employee (Harvey et al, 2002; Bennett et al, 2000). It is also an opportunity for graduate employers to establish links with HEI's to work together to promote diversity (Blackwell et al, 2000). The enhancement of employability through the provision of work placement opportunities for non-traditional graduates, is therefore a key recommendation in developing this strategy (Ibid; Kenton and Harrison, 2004<sup>9</sup>).

## Conclusion

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The basis for this study was set within the wider Irish economic context and centred within the national and international developments which have occurred within the widening participation arena. This chapter presented a review of the literature on the graduate labour market experiences of non-traditional graduates together with a model of good practice for informing programme development within widening participation. The experiences of TAP graduates since 2002 have inevitably been influenced by the economic growth enjoyed by Ireland until relatively recently. During this period, TAP graduates entered a labour market which had widespread opportunities for all, not only third-level graduates. Therefore, while the majority of research highlighted ongoing graduate disadvantage, the extent to which Trinity graduates experienced this has not as yet been explored, neither have their experiences within the context of an economic boom. These issues therefore, are a key focus of the data presented in the report.

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<sup>9</sup> This report provides some examples of case studies of universities currently working to develop the employability of graduates from non-traditional backgrounds.



## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed account of the conduct of the study from its inception to completion. The research objectives and questions, methodological approach taken, the data collection instruments used and the approach to their implementation and analysis are discussed. The conduct of the study is also reviewed in accordance with the code of ethical principles in social and educational research outlined by the Sociological Research Association (SRA, December 2003). In concluding the chapter, the strengths and the limitations of the research are highlighted.

#### Research Aims and Questions

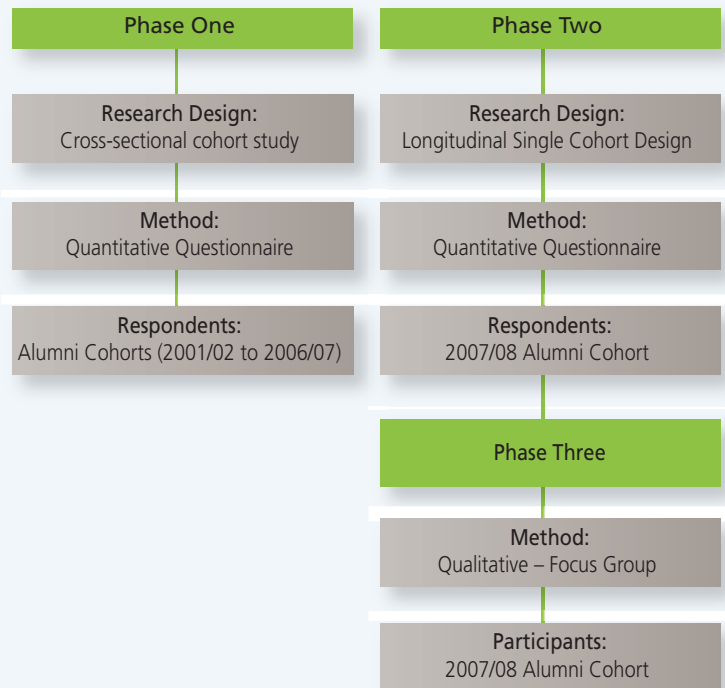
The aims of the research were to;

- 1 Profile the experiences of the TAP graduate population in relation to their professional life as Trinity College graduates (including cohorts 2001/02 to 2006/07)
- 2 Profile the further study experiences of the TAP graduate population (including cohorts 2001/02 to 2006/07)
- 3 Profile the experiences of the 2007/08 graduate cohort in relation to these two aims, and conduct a longitudinal follow up with this cohort
- 4 Inform programme development within TAP in the areas of skills development and graduate progression.

#### Research Design

The central premise of the research was the collation of detailed descriptive data pertaining to TAP's graduate population from the cohorts 2001/02 to 2006/07. The research also aimed to profile the 2007/08 cohort pertaining specifically to their socio-biographical, employment and further study progression. The research was constructed in three phases. Phase One incorporated a cross-sectional design, while Phase Two and Three incorporated a single cohort design. Therefore two research designs were implemented and are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Research Design and Method



#### Phase One

*Cross-sectional Profile of Graduates 2001/02 to 2006/07*

The first aim of the research was to profile the progression experiences of all graduate cohorts between 2001/02 to 2006/07. Prior to the commencement of the study, data profiling TAP graduates had not been collected. Therefore, the implementation of a cross-sectional design allowed this information to be collated efficiently, at one point in time, with little demand placed on respondents. This provided the baseline data for the study and it enabled comparisons with latter phases of the research, thereby allowing the study to build upon emerging findings. In Phase One of the research, the graduate population was identified from existing student records. An alumni database was established to record and track participation in the study. A literature review was conducted in light of the research aims, and this review was used to inform the development of all the data collection instruments. The TAP Graduate Questionnaire was developed, piloted, redrafted and issued to the graduate cohorts from the academic years 2001/02 to 2006/07. The instrument enabled the collection of quantitative data and it also included open-ended questions pertaining to graduate experiences under the following headings, meeting the original objectives of the research.

- **Meaning of Higher Education:** Assessment of higher educational experiences in retrospect.
- **Labour Market Profile:** Experiences of recruitment processes, assessment of labour market disadvantage
- **Transition Profile:** Career Advisory Service resources accessed for career development, level of satisfaction with labour market experiences first year post-graduation
- **Employment Profile:** Rate, type, and sector of employment, general attributes of employment, level of satisfaction with employment, socio occupational classification
- **Further Study Progression Profile:** Rate, type and level of further study engagement, motivation for engaging in further studies, and barriers to progression, assessment of the value of further studies

### Phase Two

*Longitudinal single cohort design with 2007/08 Graduate Cohort*

For Phase Two, some revisions were made to the TAP Graduate Questionnaire used in Phase One, which was then issued to the graduate cohort of 2007/08. This Phase of the research was designed in accordance with single cohort design, a longitudinal technique which incorporates cross-sectional collation of data pertaining to the experiences of a single cohort with at least one follow up data collection point. This process of triangulation enabled the collation of data drawing upon the same range of socio-biographical variables, enabling comparative statistical analysis. The limited number of interventions means participation is not onerous for respondents, whereas designs with a greater number of data collection points over a prolonged time period can affect participation rates, increasing sampling attrition.

### Phase Three

*Focus Group Follow Up with 2007/08 Graduate Cohort*

Phase Three of the research, the longitudinal strand of the study built on the data and emerging findings from Phase Two. It allowed for further triangulation of data with the emerging themes and areas of interest explored, using a qualitative approach, a focus group with graduates from the 2007/08 cohort.

## Research Method

In order to address the research aims outlined earlier, a mixed-methods approach was adopted in the collation of data as a detailed statistical profile of graduates was required for Phase One of the research. A quantitative questionnaire was deemed the most efficient method of collecting this data, and was issued to all graduates from 2001/02 to 2006/07. Similar information was required from graduates in Phase Two which was undertaken with the cohort 2007/08.

In Phase Three, a qualitative method was deemed most appropriate. Qualitative methods of inquiry emphasise the value of lived experiences and their social contexts, such methods strive for rich, nuanced and in-depth data. These approaches draw validity situated within the individual experience, with a lesser concern for generalisation of findings. The use of a focus group was therefore considered a viable method by which to harness graduates thoughts, opinions and experiences within a group setting, discussing some of the emerging findings from the quantitative strands of the research process.

## Data Collection Instruments

The data collection instruments for Phase One and Two were developed in accordance with themes identified in previous research relating to non-traditional graduate progression (Teichler, 2007; Ibid, 1999; Barber et al, 2004; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005). In Phases One and Two of the study, the TAP Graduate Questionnaire was developed on a thematic basis incorporating a range of themes such as: socio-biographical history, educational experiences, employment and labour market experiences, further studies, and the potential areas for programme development within TAP. These were explored using a range of open and closed ended quantitative indicators. Social and educational variables were included in order to provide a descriptive profile of participants such as TAP entry route, age, gender, nationality, educational attainment level, parental and partner/spouse educational attainment levels, occupational grouping, geographic location and parental status.

Drawing from ordinal, nominal and scale variables, along with open-ended questions, a more nuanced, descriptive analysis of graduate experiences particularly in relation to their employment and further study progression experiences was possible. Likert scales (1=Strongly Agree, and 5=Strongly Disagree) employing a range of indicators were used to explore labour market disadvantage (Barber et al, 2005; Gash and O'Connell, 2000; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Hills, 2002). These indicators enabled analysis to build upon the purely descriptive profile of graduates, facilitating assessment of the level of 'success' and 'satisfaction' graduates reported with their professional lives since completing their third-level studies (Elias and Purcell, 2004a).

## Piloting and Sampling

Table 1: Cohorts Included in Research Process

Graduate Cohort	No. of Graduates
2001/2002	7
2002/2003	8
2003/2004	25
2004/2005	37
2005/2006	40
2006/2007	58
2007/2008	65
<b>Total</b>	<b>240</b>

The questionnaire underwent a number of redrafts based on feedback from the members of the Alumni Advisory Group, as well as from Trinity postgraduates who were involved in the pilot of the questionnaire. Some adjustments were made to the format of the questionnaire to make it more user-friendly, and some questions were re-worded in order to aid clarity. Once revised, the questionnaire was approved for use by the Alumni Advisory Group and was issued to each of the graduate cohorts outlined in the above table.

Phase Three of the research process consisted of a longitudinal follow up focus group with 6 graduates from the 2007/08 cohort. The interview guide for this phase was developed using the same themes as outlined for use in the questionnaire, however the guide contained new open-ended questions with supportive prompts and probes designed to explore in more depth the emerging findings from Phases One and Two. Though this instrument was not piloted with graduates, it was considered by the members of the Alumni Advisory Group, who, with subsequent revisions gave approval for its use in the study. No issues were noted with question formulation or responses during the focus group session.

## Ethical Review of Research Process

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical code of the Social Research Association (SRA). Ethical research must meet four key principles which protect all parties involved in the research process (SRA, December 2003):

- Participation must be voluntary
- Participants must be adequately informed of the aims and objectives of the study
- No harm should come to those who agree to participate
- Participation must be confidential and/or anonymous.

The conduct of this study is considered and outlined below in accordance with these principles.

## No Harm to Participants

The first step in implementing a study which would ensure that no harm would be experienced by participants was the establishment of the TAP Alumni Advisory Group. This group consisted of members from across career advisory, research, educational and widening participation fields. The group considered all aspects of the research process, the aims and objectives, the research design, methodology, data collection instrumentation, analysis and reporting, providing an on-going consultation process for all aspects of the research to ensure the study met with ethical responsibilities in relation to the principle of no harm to participants.

## Informed Consent

Ensuring that each participant in the research was adequately informed of the aims and objectives of the research process was of central importance. Informed consent is an on-going process of conducting research. When graduates were invited to assist with the research they were provided with an Information Form for Participants. This form described the basis of the study, the research aims and objectives, the scope and length of the study, the funder of the research, their rights as participants, as well as the role of the researcher, and the relevant contact information for both the Access Officer and the Research Coordinator. Participants in the research were reminded of their rights each time the researcher made contact with them, whether that be in a written or verbal manner. In line with good practice, the graduates were also informed that they were entitled to a copy of the final research report and any transcribed data which applied to them.

## Voluntary Participation

It is important to emphasise to research participants that their participation is voluntary, and that they can withdraw at any stage without prior notice. A section on the Graduate Questionnaire was dedicated to informing graduates of further aspects of the research. Graduates were asked to indicate if they would be interested in participating further, and were provided with a description of what this involvement would entail.

## Confidentiality and Anonymity

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Anonymity and confidentiality are interrelated concepts of ethically sound research. However, it is acknowledged that depending on the research questions, anonymity cannot always be guaranteed, and in some cases is not explicitly practical during the research process. However the confidentiality of respondents must be maintained at all times. For example, it is acknowledged the collation and publication of socio-biographic information in studies does not preserve the principle of anonymity, yet it does preserve the principle of confidentiality. Throughout the research, continual efforts were made to ensure that participation by graduates in the research would remain confidential. In order to profile graduate experiences socio-biographical data was required, thus while enabling confidential participation, the collation of this data did not lend itself to anonymous participation. However, all records of participant's involvement in the study were stored securely, and were accessible only to the researcher conducting the study. In order to ensure confidential participation, each graduate was allocated a reference number. The referencing system was also a useful tool tracking participation in the research process, to send reminders to a non-respondent which is an ethically acceptable process in research.

## Data Analysis

### *Quantitative Analysis*

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The analysis of the data was conducted in accordance with relevant procedures for the treatment of quantitative data. The questionnaire used in quantitative elements of the research process contained a number of independent and dependent variables which required either nominal, ordinal or scale measurement. The data was entered into the *SPSS 16.0* programme for statistical analysis. As the study sought to describe graduates socio-biographic profile, and provide an assessment of their experiences, the variables were analysed according to set statistical procedures for Univariate or Bivariate analysis. In the treatment and analysis of Univariate data, nominal variables were analysed using frequencies and percentages enabling a description of TAP graduates in relation to their age category, access entrance route to Trinity College, undergraduate course of study, and final grade, as well as parental and marital, employment, and further study status. The analysis of Univariate ordinal data enabled the researcher to identify broad agreement and disagreement levels with likert scale data. Bivariate analysis enabled comparative analysis to identify trends across categories, particularly in relation to the experiences of graduates pertaining to access route and gender. Multiple cross tabulations were conducted in order to explore these trends in responses.

### *Qualitative Analysis*

All data collated in the form of open-ended responses on the questionnaires as well as during the focus group session was transcribed verbatim. This type of data was analysed through repeated re-reading of the open-ended questionnaire responses and focus group transcript. This process enabled general recurrent themes to be identified which then assisted with coding techniques, a common approach used in qualitative data analysis. The coding process assists with the interpretation of raw qualitative data contributing to a more nuanced understanding of graduate experiences.

## Conclusion

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It is acknowledged that there are strengths and limitations to all research designs, methodologies, data collection instruments, coding and analysis techniques. It is further acknowledged that researcher characteristics will also impact on the research process as well as the research outcomes. In recognition of these issues, a vigorous process of decision-making in relation to the implementation of the study was initiated. While the strengths of the approach taken to conduct the research are addressed below, the limitations of this process are also explicitly stated.

## Strengths

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From the inception of the research, steps were taken to ensure that the study was conducted in a manner that met the objectives set down by TAP. Firstly, the establishment of the Alumni Advisory Group meant that at all times, the conduct of the study was supervised by a multidisciplinary team of advisors. The emerging findings were also considered by the group to ensure the integrity of research findings and that the project the original research aims. Secondly, the design of each phase of the research was considered in detail, for example the cross-sectional design for Phase One enabled an initial detailed profile of graduate experiences from each graduate cohort. The single cohort design from Phase Two enabled the collation of comparative data with scope for further elaboration at the second data collection point. Each design meant that while TAP was able to gather the required data, the actual process of participation was not arduous for respondents. The data collection instruments were developed with continual reference to previous research in the area of non-traditional graduate progression. As such the study built upon the existing body of research and had a wide frame of reference for developing concepts and Likert scale indicators (Elias and Purcell, 2004a; Gash and O'Connell, 2000; Hills, 2002; Barber et al, 2005; HEA, 2008a).

The data collection instruments included a range of quantitative and qualitative elements which provided a nuanced picture of graduate progression in many areas of graduate life. The distribution of the research instruments was aligned with good practice, whereby the nine month post graduation from third-level is considered to provide an accurate first destination indication of experiences, as sufficient time has elapsed in order to allow them to experience the labour market and/or engage with further studies (HEA, 2008; Ibid, 2007; Ibid, 2006). Good practice in social research methodologies suggest that participants in the research are rewarded in some way for their time and assistance with the process, and as a token of appreciation for their assistance with the study, all graduates were offered a gift token. The focus group method contributed to the study as it allowed further, in-depth exploration of the mainly quantitative methods which preceded it. All graduates from the 0708 cohort were invited to participate so that a mixture of Young Adult, Mature Student, employed, job seeker and post-graduates were represented. Finally, a key strength of the study was that it highlighted areas for programme development within TAP in the area of alumni progression, meeting a key objective of the research.

## Limitations

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An immediate limitation of the study was that it did not employ a random sampling technique. This decision was taken for two reasons. Firstly no baseline data pertaining to TAP graduates existed prior to the research and secondly, the graduate population from which to draw a sample was relatively small. Therefore the findings cannot be generalised beyond those who participated in the research. Furthermore the study did not seek to explore causality in any way. It is acknowledged that this affects the external validity of the research. It is reiterated however, that the primary purpose of the study was descriptive, to profile graduate experiences, not to investigate causality or to generalise the findings to other non-traditional groups either within Trinity College or the broader national context.

Though the study may not adequately address external validity, it does conform to internal validity as it meets the original terms of reference for the research, and the findings are considered applicable to the majority of TAP graduates, as evidenced by the high response rate to the study. It is acknowledged that only graduates who entered Trinity College through the Trinity Access Programmes, and who successfully completed their courses were included in the research. Other TAP students who went on to attend other HEI's were not included as their experiences were beyond the scope of this study. Finally it is also acknowledged that the research did not explore the experiences of other non-traditional groups in Trinity College, an aim which was beyond the remit of this project.

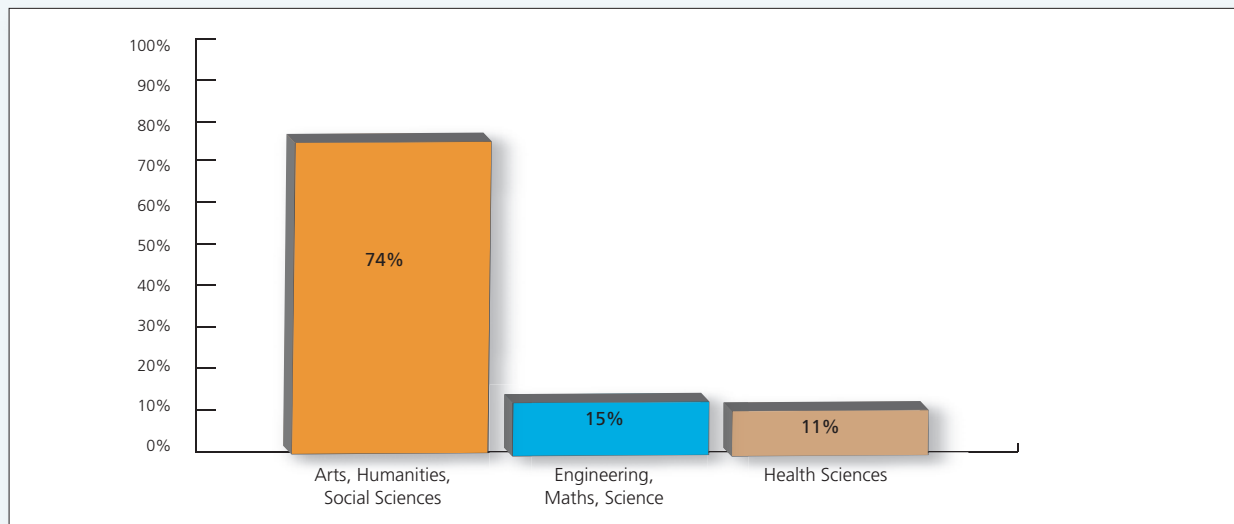
Approximately one third of graduates in Phase One and Phase Two did not participate. Some graduates were not contactable at their original addresses despite multiple attempts to make contact with them. A minority of graduates explicitly stated they did not want to participate in the study, and were removed from the mailing list. As previously stated, data collection points were aligned in order to enhance the quality of data collated as well as to maximise the response rate, however as the focus group discussion occurred during December 2009, this timeframe was not ideal, and did affect participation rates for this data collection point. Nevertheless, the focus group was scheduled for a mutually convenient time for the participants.

The characteristics of the researcher will impact upon the conduct, as well as the outcomes of a research study. A researcher's age, gender, class, and level of educational attainment are all variables that can either enhance or limit research outcomes. The establishment of the Alumni Advisory Group meant however that the research process from inception to completion was open to question and clarification. Secondly, all research instruments were vetted by the Group in order to ensure they met with ethical guidelines, and as a final effort to limit any potentially negative effect on participants. Furthermore, detailed research information forms were provided to all graduates with an outline of the need for, the planned conduct of, as well as the outcomes of the study.

## Chapter 4:

### Socio-Demographic Profile

Chart 1: Respondents Undergraduate Faculty



#### Introduction

This chapter of the study presents a detailed description of the socio-demographic profile of the 171 graduates who participated in the research. The findings from each phase are presented concurrently, aiding a comparison of findings. The profile specifically outlines the gender, nationality, age and parental status of the participants in the research. The graduates' educational characteristics are also outlined including their route to Trinity College, undergraduate course and faculty of study, year of degree completion and the class of degree awarded. The educational levels of the parents/guardians as well as the partner's/spouses of respondents are also presented. The combined response rate for both phases of the research stands at 71.25% (171) in line with other Irish research studies of this nature (HEA, 2008; HEA, 2006; Gash and O'Connell, 2000)<sup>10</sup>.

#### Biographical Profile

77% (131) of respondents who participated in the research were female, and 23% (38) were male. 97% (170) of respondents described themselves as Irish. Respondents ranged in age from 22 to 68 years, the majority of whom

(76%: 129) were within the 20 to 29 age bracket. Participants were asked to outline their current relationship status. Analysis demonstrated that 40% (67) were in a relationship, 43% (73) were single, while 17% (28) were married. Three quarters of respondents did not have children (75%: 127), however of those with children the majority were Mature Students.

#### Academic and Educational Profile

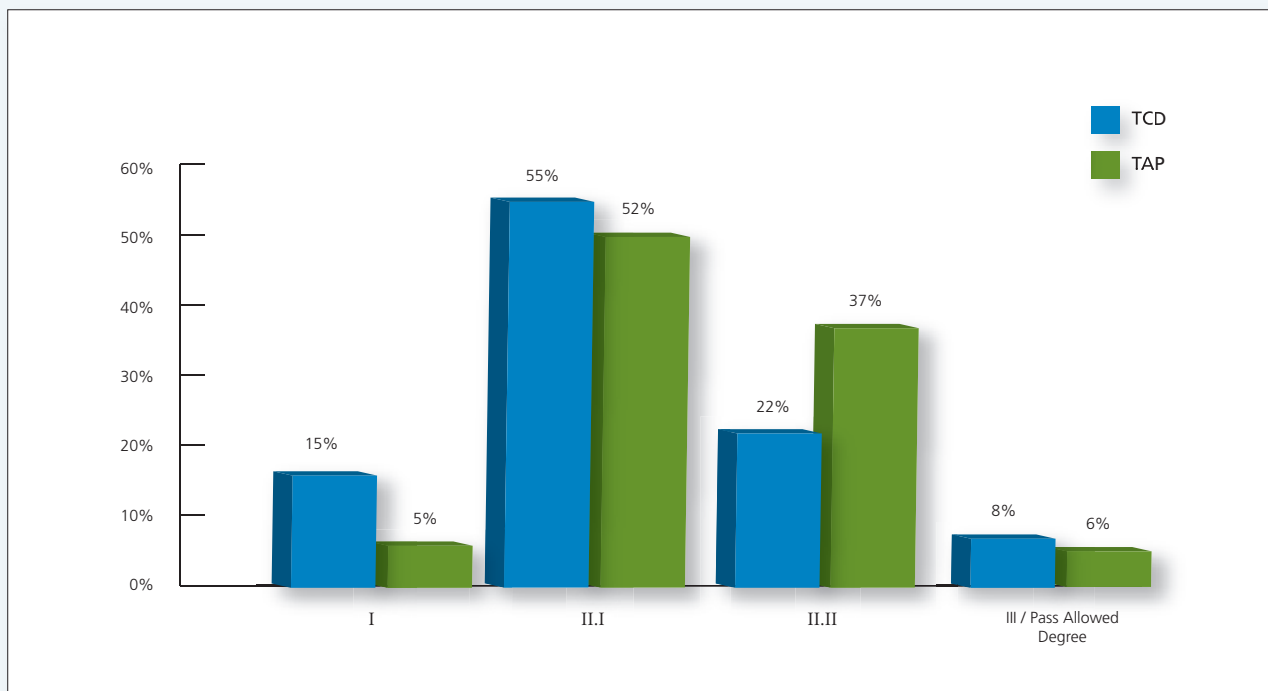
There are six entry routes to TCD through TAP which incorporate two generic categories of non-traditional student<sup>11</sup>, 'Mature Students' and 'Young Adults'. The Young Adults accounted for 75% (127) of respondents, while 25% (42) were Mature Student entrants.

TAP students are represented in all faculties within the College (TAP, 2009a) and the respondents also mirrored this trend. As the chart above demonstrates, the majority of respondents pursued courses within the *Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* (74%:125), 15% (25) studied within the *Faculty of Engineering, Mathematics and Science*, 11% (18) studied within the *Faculty of Health Sciences*. The Business, Economics and Social Studies (BESS), Science, and General Nursing courses were the most frequently studied.

<sup>10</sup> 121 TAP graduates from Phase One of the research returned their completed questionnaires for analysis; however one questionnaire was not inputted into SPSS for analysis as it was returned after the closing date for questionnaire returns. However this graduates qualitative comments are drawn upon in this respect in the report. 50 graduates from Phase Two participated.

<sup>11</sup> TAP works with six categories of non-traditional student: Mature Students: are entrants who completed the Foundation Course for Higher Education or the Pearse and Plunket Colleges' University Access Courses. These students are normally over the age of 23. Young Adults are entrants who completed the Foundation Course for Higher Education and are usually between 17 to 23 years old and have recently completed the Leaving Certificate or its equivalent. HEAR entrants are Young Adult students who have achieved a determined number of CAO points, and compete for direct entry to Trinity College through the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) reduced points scheme. These graduates were students who had completed the Leaving Certificate in the previous school year. For the purposes of this report Foundation Course Young Adults, Liberties College Access Course students, and HEAR entrants are referred to as 'Young Adults'.

Chart 2: TAP and TCD: Comparative Graduate Grade Attainment



Concerns have been voiced as to whether the increase in numbers accessing and attaining a third-level qualification would result in a downward trend in academic standards (Bowl, 2003; Layer, 2002; McDonald and Stratta, 2001; Mayo and Collymore, 2000; Betts, 1999). In considering this, the range of class of degree awarded to TAP respondents was compared to those of the overall Trinity population across cohorts from 2001/2002 to 2007/2008<sup>12</sup>. The quality of degrees attained by TAP graduates from Trinity mirror those attained by other Trinity graduates, with a second class honours first division degree (52%: 88) most frequently attained. While the overall Trinity graduate population achieve more first class honours (15%) than TAP graduates (5%: 8), fewer TAP graduates obtained pass degrees. Therefore it is evident that the academic attainment levels of TAP graduates and TCD alumni are broadly parallel. These findings should go some way toward addressing the quality and equality debate regarding widening participation to higher education.

The grade attainment patterns for Mature Students and Young Adults were also compared and it was found that the respondents had similar levels of achievement across the higher grade bands (a II.1 was the most frequently attained grade by Mature Students (50%: 21) and Young Adults (53%: 67). It is pertinent that attainment levels for Mature Student graduates are in line with Staunton's (2009) study of Mature Student graduates from University College, Cork, where 58% of graduates were awarded either a first class or second class honour degree.

### Partner/Spouse and Parent/Guardian Education Level

The educational attainment levels for the partner/spouse of respondents as well as their parent(s) and guardian(s) were analysed. The most frequent level of educational attainment for the spouse/partner was a degree (25%:22). In contrast, the most frequent level of education for the parent(s)/guardian(s) of respondents was primary level (mother(s)/female guardian(s), 67%: (59), and father(s)/male guardian(s), 60%: (53).

<sup>12</sup> The statistics are based on grade attainment statistics provided by the Senior Lecturer's Reports from 2002/2003 to 2007/2008. The reports are accessible at: <http://www.tcd.ie/vp-cao/slo/vpsloslar.php>.

**Table 2: Phase Two Occupational Group of Partner/Spouse & Parent(s)/Guardian(s)**

Relationship	Most Frequent Socio-Occupational Group	Job Type
Mother/Female Guardian	Non-Manual	Administrative and Clerical
Father/Male Guardian	Manual-Skilled	Labourer, Technician, Driver
Partner/Spouse	Manual-Skilled	Driver, Technician

Non-traditional students come from lower socio-economic groups under-represented in the third-level sector. In Phase Two of the research the forms of employment engaged in by the partner/spouse, mother/female guardian or father/male guardian of the graduates were classified according to Clancy and Wall's (2000) system. The table above demonstrates that the respondents come from social backgrounds where Non-Manual and Manual-Skilled forms of labour are most prevalent. Yet, it was noted that the types of employment engaged in by partner(s)/spouse(s) is distributed across a wider set of categories such as Higher, Lower and Employer/Manager categories. It was further noted that three of the graduates had a partner/spouse engaged in higher education, two at PhD level<sup>13</sup>.

- 52% (88) of respondents were awarded a II.1 final grade compared to 55%<sup>14</sup> of Trinity graduates
- The most frequent educational level for partners'/spouses of participants was that of a Degree (25%: 22)
- The most frequent educational level for parents'/guardians of participants was Primary-Level (Mother/Female Guardian, 67%: 59; Father/Male Guardian, 60%: 53)
- The occupational profile of the parent(s)/guardian(s), partner/spouse of graduates from Phase Two highlighted that TAP graduates come from backgrounds where Non-Manual and Manual-Skilled forms of employment are typical.

### Socio-Demographic Profile: Key Findings

A summary of the key socio-demographic information pertaining to respondents is presented below.

- 71% (171) of graduates took part in the research
- 77% (131) of respondents were female; 23% (38) were male
- 97% (170) of respondents were Irish
- The majority of participants were in their early 20's
- Young Adults represented 75% (127) of respondents; 25% (42) were Mature Students
- 74% (125) of respondents studied within the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; BESS was the most frequent course pursued (14.2%: 24)

<sup>13</sup> Research participants are assured that their participation is confidential, as such some socio-biographical data which has been drawn on in this research has not been made available to a general audience in order to maintain confidentiality of participation.

<sup>14</sup> Data is drawn from the Senior Lecturer's Office Annual Reports. The frequencies relating to the percentages are not published and are therefore not included in this report.



## Chapter 5:

### The Meaning of a Higher Education

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A key aim of the study was to collect data which would provide information for TAP on the successes and the struggles that its past students may have faced in professional life (Loxley and Kenny, 2009; Staunton, 2009; Purcell and Elias, 2006; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005). While the report provides a detailed overview of what graduate life is like for TAP graduates, this data does not address the original motivating factors the respondents had for seeking a third-level education. Therefore an assessment of whether these graduates are 'successful' within professional life would have been limited by not providing a space for graduates to consider in retrospect what they originally wanted from a higher education. Graduates were asked to consider what participation in higher education meant to them personally. Evident from the responses in both phases is that the opportunity to dedicate four years of study to enhance one's knowledge of the world was an important motivating factor, for TAP graduates.

*Knowledge, and to open my mind to a better understanding of life, the human mind and the world (Graduate 146).*

*[I wanted] more knowledge, further education and academic success (Graduate 95).*

*To see what else was available from the world (Graduate 113).*

The opportunity to develop holistically as a person was also a valued effect of higher educational attainment:

*An opportunity to discover my strengths and develop them (Graduate 93).*

*A holistic improvement in how I conducted myself in the world and a qualification (Graduate 87).*

The value of a third-level qualification was also understood by respondents to be pivotal to securing worthwhile, stable employment which contributes to career development.

*An opportunity to become a professional, competent and earn a good wage (Graduate 164).*

*A good base to start off my career (Graduate 116).*

*Good job, good income, happiness, security (Graduate 103).*

A further theme evident within responses was that the achievement of a third-level qualification was a life long educational ambition.

*...entering Trinity allowed me to fulfil a long held dream and ambition (Graduate 106).*

*I wanted the experience of going to college, the opportunity [for] more jobs than [available with] a Leaving Certificate, [and] to give myself more opportunities in the future (Graduate 47).*

The majority of respondents in each phase of the research believe their original motivating factors for pursuing a higher education have been achieved<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, approximately 70% of graduates from Phase One (73%: 87) and Phase Two (70%: 35) of the research indicated they would pursue the same undergraduate course again, mirroring the trend for other graduates (CIPD, 2006a). Kelly et al (2008) assert that student subject choice at third-level influences the range of opportunities students can benefit from as graduates. Approximately one-third of graduates in each phase of the study indicated they would not pursue the same course again. The qualitative findings highlight that in retrospect, they would have preferred a qualification which was geared toward a particular profession with enhanced employment prospects.

*No [I would not complete the same course again] because it is difficult to find employment with my qualification [but] yes [I would complete the same course again] because I was passionate about my course (Graduate 95).*

*Although I did enjoy studying my subject it was less useful than I had thought at the start (Graduate 28).*

### The Meaning of a Higher Education: Key Findings

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Assessing what non-traditional graduates want from a higher education is essential if their experiences of professional life and further study are to be fully appreciated. It was demonstrated that the graduates were motivated to engage in third-level education in order to fulfil an academic as well as a personal ambition. It was also a means by which to enhance their career prospects. Further key findings demonstrated that:

- The overall majority of respondents from each phase of the research would pursue the same undergraduate course again
- In the main respondents in each phase of the research stated their original motivating reasons had been met through their completion of higher education
- Graduates who would not pursue the same course again indicated that this was due to the broad nature of the degree, preferring a more vocationally orientated qualification which assists with entry to graduate professions.

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<sup>15</sup> 82% (97) from Phase One and 75% (35) from Phase Two

## Chapter 6:

### The Graduate Labour Market

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#### Introduction

The transition from third-level studies into the graduate labour market or onto further study is a pivotal time for graduates. The ability of new graduates to successfully navigate the labour market at an early stage, factors in future career progression (Elias and Purcell, 2004b; Pitcher and Purcell, 1998). It is important for graduates to be able to research and obtain professional employment suitable to their skills, interests and abilities (Brennan and Osborne, 2008; Pitcher, and Purcell, 1998; Layer, 2006). The earlier the graduate utilises their transferable skills the easier the transition from university to professional working life and the more successful the graduate is likely to be. Early preparation for graduate life is therefore essential in establishing a professional career (Purcell, et al, 2004; Purcell et al, 2005, Purcell et al, 1999).

This chapter presents an overview of the types of preparation the respondents made for becoming graduates in the final year of undergraduate study. It explores their experiences of the first year in the labour market. The chapter also considers the graduates experiences in respect of labour market disadvantage, which has been highlighted as an issue for first generation college graduates from non-traditional backgrounds (Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Brennan and Shah, 2003; Hills, 2002; Cooper et al, 2002; Hogarth et al, 1997; Brown and Scase, 1994). This occurs when graduates socio-biographical characteristics affect their prospects in the labour market, characteristics such as age, gender; socio-economic background, race, as well as educational attainment are seen to affect future graduate opportunities (Hesketh, 2003; Purcell et al, 2003; Lavelle et al, 2000; Purcell and Hogarth, 1999; Heath and McMahon, 1997; Drew and Heritage, 1992). This chapter explores the initial early labour market experiences of respondents, and provides an assessment of whether the graduates experienced disadvantage in the labour market.

#### Careers Advisory Service: Resources Used

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The respondents were asked to indicate whether they had used the College's Careers Advisory Service (CAS), and to outline the types of resources they had drawn upon (Goodman, 2005; Purcell and Rowley, 2001; Harris, 2001). Approximately half (Phase One: 48%:58, Phase Two: 52%: 26) of the respondents in each phase of the research stated they had used the Careers Advisory Service to assist them in making the transition into graduate life. In order to explore the level and type of CAS usage amongst respondents, they were asked to indicate what services they had used. Meeting with a careers advisor was the most frequent service used (26), followed by attendance at a seminar (14), and curriculum vitae development (11). The respondents articulated the importance

of developing a career strategy at an earlier stage during undergraduate study, seeking career advice and guidance as well as developing effective career seeking skills. Research in this area has highlighted the need for non-traditional students to engage with careers advisory services if they are to be effective in the labour market (Brennan and Shah, 2003; Careers Services Review, 2001; Purcell and Pitcher, 1996).

*... [Undergraduates should] take every opportunity to explore their career opportunities through early discussion with their careers advisors (Graduate 67).*

*Offer more advice on career options and on current jobs market (Graduate 26).*

*Seek careers advice early on – graduates are often shocked by the need for more training post-graduation (Graduate 52).*

#### Early Labour Market Experiences

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The respondents were also asked to consider whether their experiences in their first year after college had met their expectations. Approximately 60% of respondents in each phase of the research agreed their expectations had been met (Phase One: 55%: 66, Phase Two: 58%: 29). This finding was explored further in discussions, and comments highlighted that this was due to their ability to secure employment broadly related to their primary degree, secondly it was because they were engaged in a role which enabled them to build their work experience, and for other graduates this was because they had successfully entered postgraduate study.

*I anticipated that I would be working for a large business corporation and that is what I have achieved (Graduate 152).*

*...working full-time as part of a training placement for a period of one year is a requirement...to become a registered pharmacist (Graduate 93).*

*I always wanted to go on and do postgraduate studies, as I really enjoy [the subject area] (Graduate 148).*

*I had made my mind up to study [for] a PhD (Graduate 65).*

However, it was also noted that approximately 40% of respondents in each phase of the research stated their experiences had not met with their expectations. Three reasons were cited for this. Mainly this was because the graduate had gained employment in an area unrelated to their field of study at third-level. It also occurred because the graduate lacked a clear plan in advance of entering the labour market. For others, unexpected opportunities arose for them, for example engaging with further study.

*[I had] no clear direction/idea of where I wanted to work. The last year was so busy and with exam stress [I] was not able to plan until I had time to think (Graduate 37).*

*...I thought I would gain employment using my degree. However, I am enjoying working in a higher profile firm and view it as a stepping stone in my career which provides financial security (Graduate 108).*

It was also noted in the comments made by the graduates from Phase Two that the wider economic climate had affected their opportunities. This was explored during the focus group session, where many respondents highlighted that they had been prepared to expect fewer opportunities. For others, the lack of employment opportunities post-graduation was something for which they were less prepared.

*...We were told that not many people were gonna get jobs, I am a nurse and...I had no hope of getting a job in a hospital...and I found that hard from going from being in college...we were paid in our last year of college to work as a nurse and [in the end] not a lot of us got jobs (Focus Group Participant 1).*

*At the start [looking for a job] was very specific like but...the last few months it's gone like [you] have to take anything if you can get your hands on it, just for a while like. But at the start like it (job seeking) was fairly select...you were just seeing who you would like to work with (Focus Group Participant 5).*

As graduates from non-traditional backgrounds may not be aware of what graduate employers look for in potential employees (Purcell and Pitcher, 1996; Purcell et al, 2002; Hills, 2002), the respondents were asked to outline from their experiences, employee characteristics which recruiters deem desirable. The more aware respondents are of these requirements, the better able they should be to locate and obtain employment which suits their skills and abilities (Curry et al, 2003; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005). The respondents outlined that they believed employers look for candidates who are team players, who can demonstrate initiative, and who can draw from their range of skills and adapt them to the role.

*Motivated, ambitious, hard working, dynamic, works well within a team and yet not afraid to show initiative (Graduate 93).*

*People who are motivated, [who demonstrate] good leadership [skills], can work with a team [and are] good listener[s] (Graduate 54).*

*Confidence in their ability to think critically and analytically in certain situations, ability to work to deadlines and multi-task, open mindedness, good interpersonal skills (Graduate 49).*

*People who achieved a strong degree but also strong interpersonal and team skills, extra curricular activities [are also very important] (Graduate 152).*

*A clear thinking astute, organised and opinionated person who is engaging with the world around them in a diverse way, a confident, positive, well rounded character (Graduate 115).*

Graduates from Phase Two also deemed the possession of work experience in related areas of employment as a favourable addition. Two-thirds of respondents felt that they matched the characteristics which employers look for (Phase One: 63%:57, Phase Two: 63%:22) (Forfas, 2007d). Those who felt they did not, were mainly employed in administrative/clerical roles.

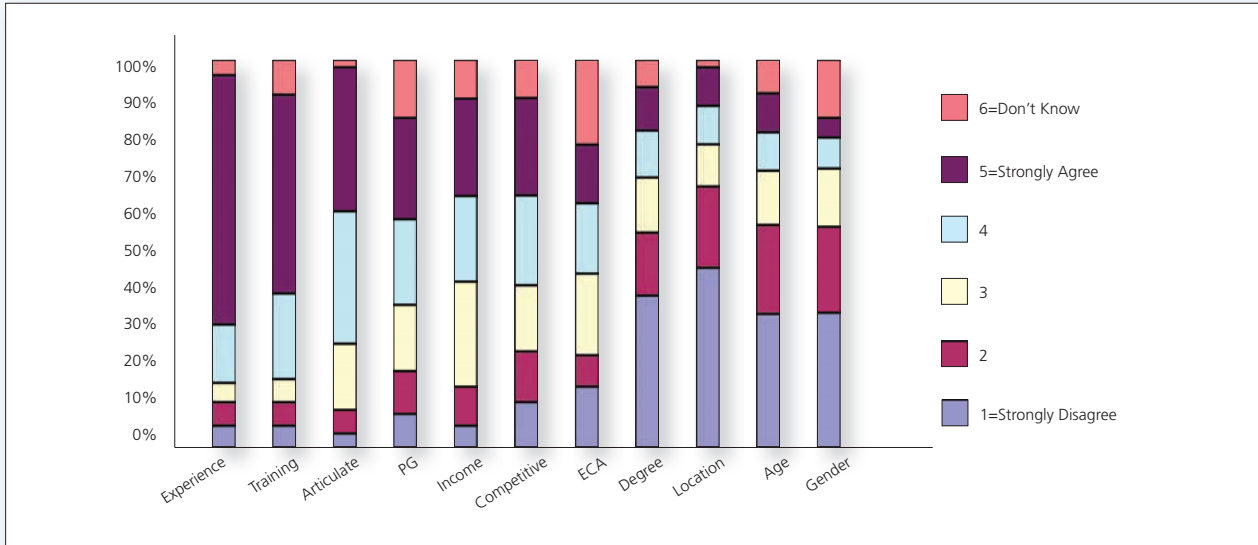
*A lot of jobs advertised in my sector at the minute are looking for a lot of experience, particularly postgraduate experience – how do we get that if no one will employ us? (Graduate 161).*

*There are so many people who...have [work] experience and are out of work, and we are going fresh from college “oh but I have a really good degree” (Focus Group Participant 6).*

The transition from university student to graduate employee is no longer characterised by linear progression into a stable, secure, lifelong professional form of employment (Elias & Purcell, 2004). Seeking and obtaining graduate employment is a process of planning, preparation and perseverance, particularly in an economy characterised by mass higher educational attainment and economic slowdown (Hesketh, 2003; Brown, 2000; Curry et al, 2003; David and Foray, 2002; FAS/ESRI, 2008). It has been highlighted that non-traditional graduates can have a fragmented experience when seeking employment in such circumstances (Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Couppie and Mansuy, 2000).

The respondents were asked to consider the extent to which their experiences of the labour market had been influenced or restricted by certain educational and/or socio-demographic characteristics (Purcell et al, 2002). Participants were asked to consider a range of statements designed to assess their experiences in the labour market in this regard (Harvey, 2005; Morey et al, 2003; Blasko et al, 2002; Brown and Scase, 1994). What was evident from responses is that participants were aware of the necessity to possess certain characteristics which enhance a graduates employability within the labour market (Lavelle, 2000; Aston and Bekhradnia, 2003; Mason, 2002; McGuinness and Doyle, 2004; Rae, 2008).

Chart 3: Assessment of Labour Market Disadvantage<sup>16</sup>



The majority of respondents in each phase indicated that they believe prospective employees who hold relevant work experience (Phase One: 79%:91, Phase Two: 82%:36) will obtain a competitive edge in the labour market. They also agreed that employees who have evidence of a further education or training qualification are at an advantage over those who do not (Phase One: 73% :84, Phase Two: 72%: 31) as are those who obtain a postgraduate qualification. Furthermore a well-rounded graduate, who can demonstrate their skill-set at interview stage is considered to be at an advantage (Phase One: 72%: 83, Phase Two: 74%: 32).

It is encouraging that the respondents did not perceive that attributes relating either to their educational or their socio-biographical traits to be a disadvantage in the pursuit of employment. The respondents, in the main, disagreed that the area they currently reside in, was a barrier to accessing graduate level employment (Phase One: 67%:78, Phase Two: 61%: 27). They did not perceive age to be a factor in accessing employment suitable for third-level graduates (Phase One: 58%: 67, Phase Two: 75%: 33). Finally respondents disagreed that a graduates gender is a barrier to full participation in the labour market (Phase One: 57%:65, Phase Two: 68%: 30). However, during Phase Three of the study the Mature Students raised a number of issues in relation to their experience of job seeking, locating suitable graduate employment, and balancing family duties which had hindered their progress to date.

*...They are not particularly jobs I want you know...I actually did special needs for a while, and they thought it was a big deal offering me special needs jobs. I was saying "yeah but I have done a four year degree"...* (Focus Group Participant 4).

*[When I was offered a job]...while it was social care it was residential so like it was 24 hour shifts and overnights and I mean...I have kids and I don't think I could leave them...whereas if I was single maybe and younger I would jump at that and worked my way up so it didn't suit [my circumstances]* (Focus Group Participant 4).

### Graduate Labour Market Profile: Key Findings

The findings presented in this section are encouraging. There is little evidence to suggest that labour market disadvantage is a widespread experience. In contrast, it is suggested that graduates are confident in their abilities, and are generally effective at demonstrating their skills which they developed from engaging with higher education. They also demonstrated a good understanding of what employers look for in graduates. However, it was highlighted that in some instances, respondents felt they lacked certain attributes, for example, work experience.

- Approximately half of the graduates had used CAS, most frequently visiting a career advisor
- The majority indicated that their expectations of their first year post-graduation had been met
- The respondents believe employers look for team playing, motivated and efficient graduates who can demonstrate their skills base developed through participation in higher education
- The possession of work experience, a further qualification, and interviewing effectively, are perceived by respondents to be key to gaining an advantage in the labour market
- The respondents do not believe that their age, current location or gender disadvantage them in the labour market
- It was highlighted by Mature Students that their personal and familial responsibilities can hinder their progression.

<sup>16</sup> For the 'Assessment of Labour Market Disadvantage' chart from Phase Two see Appendix.

## Chapter 7

### Employment Profile

#### Introduction

This chapter presents the employment profile of respondents and attributes of employment relating to contracts, gross annual salary, as well as the main business of the employer. The graduate's motivations for accepting their current form of employment is discussed, as is their level of satisfaction with the role. At the time of the distribution of the questionnaire, 75% (90) of graduates from Phase One and 76% (38) from Phase Two were employed (the average employment rate was 75% :128). Those respondents not in employment most frequently stated they were involved in further education/training, were job seeking, travelling or had family duties. When the rate of employment of Young Adults and Mature Students was compared, a difference in the rate of unemployment between the groups was observed. For example in Phase One of the study there was only a 2% differential in the rate of employment when Mature Students (74%: 25) and Young Adults (76%: 65) were compared, however, in Phase Two there was an 11% differential.

Participants were asked to outline what they look for in employment as third-level graduates. It was apparent that they seek employment which provides the opportunity to engage in work which contributes to society and promotes social justice.

*Helping young people from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve their educational ambitions (Graduate 117).*

*Working with children in a non-school environment (or at a policy level) to improve enjoyment of English as a subject or/and knowledge, appreciation and enjoyment of the Arts, or working at a policy level to implement this into current educational system (Graduate 74).*

*Being a successful criminal lawyer, with great results in maintaining and promoting social justice – with three holidays per year! (Graduate 23).*

The graduates also highlighted that the conditions of employment are important, and they look for challenging work, flexible working patterns, a competitive salary and the opportunity to use the skills they developed at third-level.

*A job that is both challenging and offers satisfaction, one that develops your knowledge and indeed your social skills [as well as being] financially rewarding (Graduate 69).*

*Working with people as part of a team, use of initiative and skills sets already obtained. Constantly learning and acquiring new skills. Working towards goals and deadlines whilst helping and coaching colleagues (Graduate 103).*

*[A job that utilises the many skills which I have learned at college, [with] respect from [the] employer [as well as being] financially rewarding (Graduate 91).*

The opportunity to engage in work experience was also cited as important.

*It is an area I am deeply interested in and it provides me with clinical experience should I wish to apply to a postgraduate course requiring such experience (Graduate 87).*

*I always wanted to practice law and completing an apprenticeship is a requirement in order to qualify as a solicitor. As apprenticeships are extremely difficult to obtain, I decided to accept this one when offered just to ensure that I could attend the law society... (Graduate 35).*

It was noted that the respondents from Phase Two, had highly specific aims in relation to the type of employment they want to engage in, particularly employment within the more recognised graduate professions such as law, medicine, teaching and lecturing.

*In the immediate term [I want to be] a trainee solicitor, in the long term, a partner in a law firm (Graduate 122).*

*[I would like] a lectureship in a renowned university (Graduate 124).*

There was also evidence that graduates aspire to enter roles beyond those of typically graduate careers, referred to in the literature as 'new' and 'niche' graduate professions, as the following comments demonstrate (Elias and Purcell, 2004a):

*Working in a small group as part of a wildlife research team on the road (Graduate 50).*

*I would like to be, and I will be a writer (Graduate 146).*

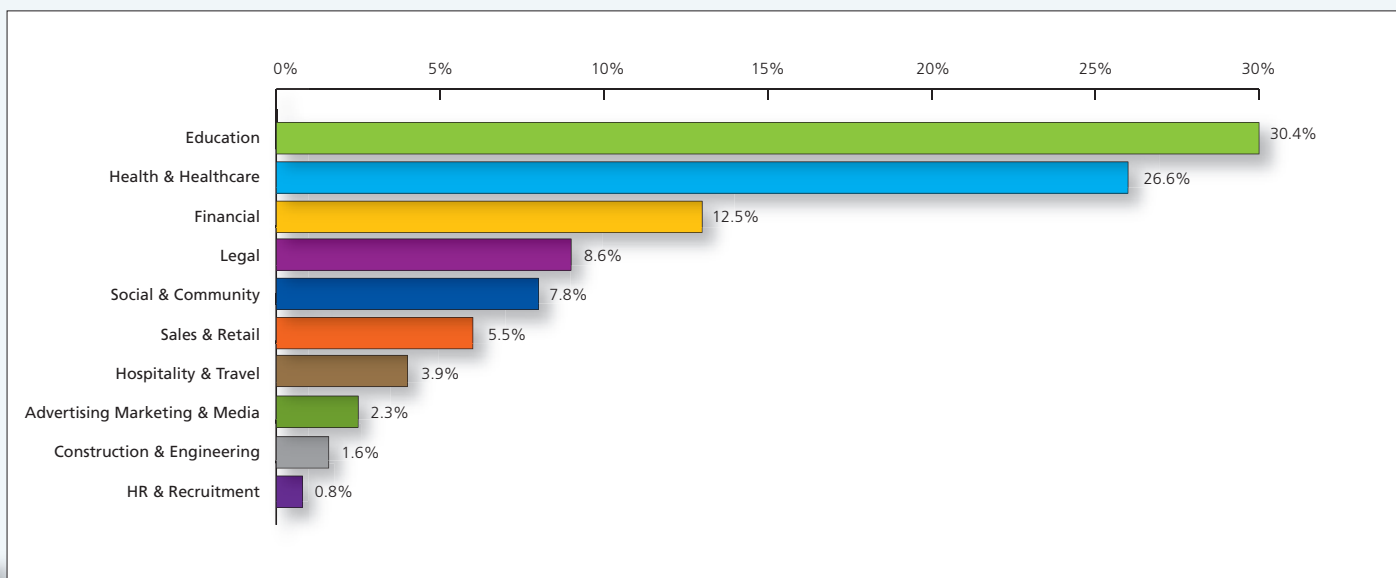
*[I aim to be] elected to Dáil Éireann as a TD (Graduate 156).*

It is pertinent that 63% of respondents in each phase of the research (Phase One: 57, Phase Two: 22) indicated that their current role met these attributes. However some respondents highlighted that they applied for the role for pragmatic reasons, financial security for example.

*...I needed the money. It is not my chosen career but this job is varied, offering lots of financial analysis and client contact. I'm learning a lot (Graduate 5).*

*It was a job and there are very few with [sector] cutbacks (Graduate 57).*

Chart 4: Employment Sector



The respondents predominantly engaged in forms of work characteristic of 'graduate' employment (HEA, 2008a; HEA, 2006; Purcell et al, 2005; Purcell et al, 2004). When the breakdown by employment sector was compared to national trends, it is encouraging that these were broadly paralleled (HEA, 2008). The majority of university graduates nationally, for example enter 'Non Market Services' encompassing the Education and Health sectors (collectively representing 33% of graduates nationally). The employment sector chart above demonstrates that the Education (30.4%: 39)<sup>17</sup>, Health and Healthcare sector (26.6%: 34), are also the main areas where TAP graduates find employment. 'Financial' (12.5%: 16), 'Legal' (8.6%: 11), and 'Social and Community' (7.8%: 10) were also sectors in which the respondents were employed.

When compared, Young Adults are represented across a wider range of employment sectors than Mature Students who are predominantly situated within the Education sector (17) as lecturers, second-level teachers, tutors, librarians, as well as in administrative posts, whereas Young Adults most frequently locate employment in the Health and Healthcare sector (29) as social workers, occupational therapists, nurses, physiotherapists, pre-registration pharmacists, as well as those engaging in administrative roles.

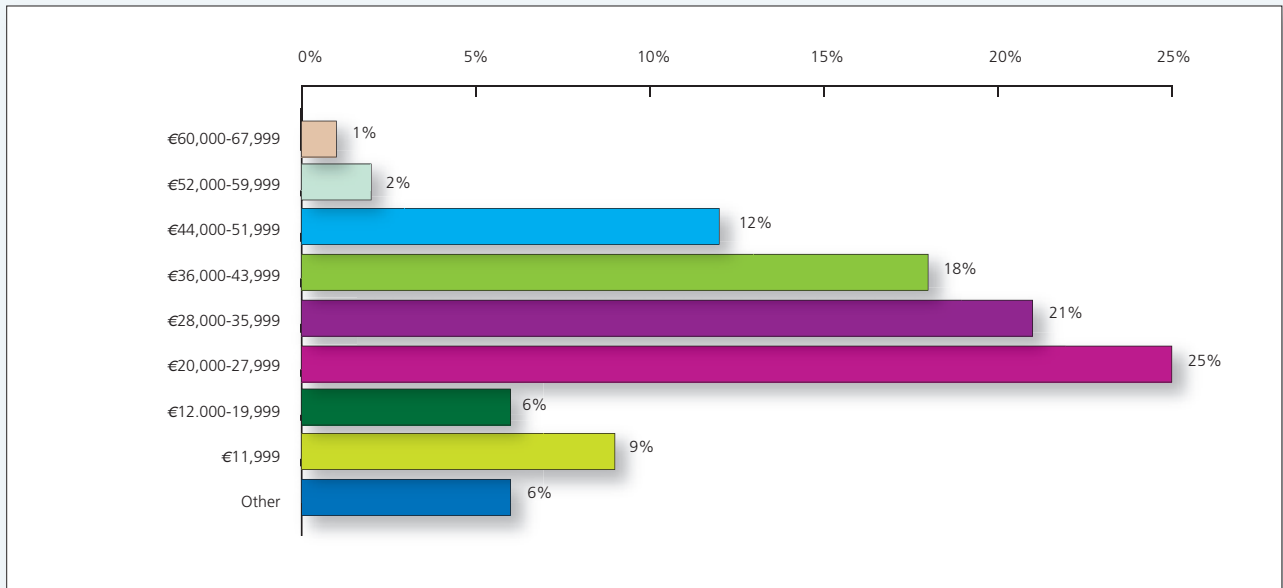
### Attributes of Employment

The respondents were represented across a range of contract types for example it was noted that a 'permanent' contract is the most frequently cited (52%: 47) type of contract for respondents from Phase One. Perhaps as an indication of the wider economic climate employed graduates from Phase Two of the research are most frequently hired on a 'temporary' basis (41.2%: 14).

Working hours ranged from a little as five hours per week to as many as 56 hours per week. However it was noted that while respondents in Phase One of the research typically work for 36-40 hours in a standard working week (53%: 48), the working hours per week for graduates from the 0708 cohort however, were more widely dispersed, with 35 to 40 hours per week the most frequent (24%: 8). In comparison with respondents from Phase One, the number of working hours per week has declined with 39% (13) of Phase Two respondents working up to 30 hours. Working overtime was not a key feature of employment for respondents from either Phase One or Phase Two of the study.

<sup>17</sup> The respondents are engaged in a wider spectrum of other teaching posts namely lecturing, tutoring (at third-level, as well as English language tutoring), teaching drama, and teaching students with special needs. They are also employed as librarians/assistant librarians, or in educational research. Three graduates work in clerical/administrative posts within the educational sector.

Chart 5: Salary and Income Range

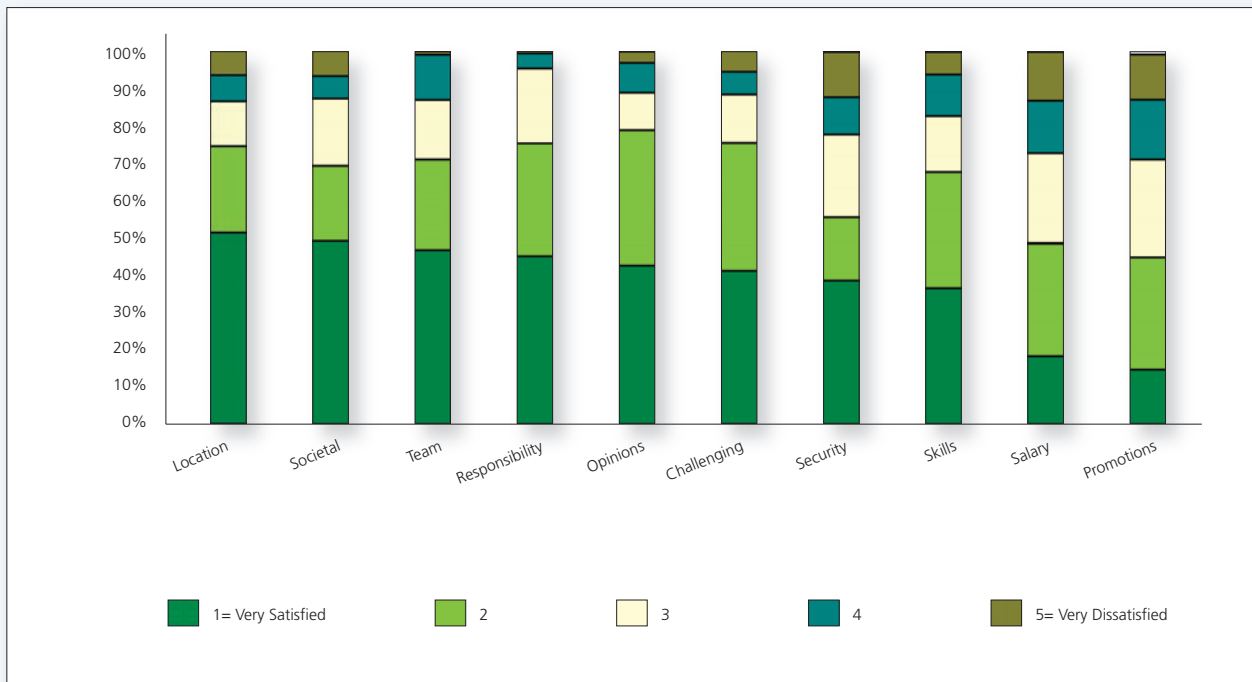


Research indicates that the initial starting salaries of graduates from non-traditional backgrounds tend to be lower than the income achieved by other college graduates (Brennan and Shah, 2003). This was not the case for the respondents, as the two most commonly cited income bands (€20-27,999 (25%: 32) and €28-35,999 (21%: 25) are in line with the national graduate starting salary band of €21- €24,999 (HEA, 2008a).

The gross annual salary of Mature Students and Young Adults were compared to investigate if there was a difference in earnings between the two groups. In the case of Mature Students (35%:8) the most frequently earned salary is €20,000-27,999, while for Young Adults it was one increment higher, at €28-35,999 (24%: 15). This trend was repeated across the income levels of Mature Students from Phase Two. The study highlights, therefore, that Mature Students earned less than their Young Adult counterparts.

The respondents were asked to consider a series of ordinal statements (using a scale where 1=Very Satisfied and 5=Very Dissatisfied) regarding aspects of their employment, from its location, range of skills used, to the potential influence this role had on society. They were then asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with these specific aspects (Mora et al, 2007; Teichler, 2007; Ibid, 2000; Brennan and Shah, 2003). The employment satisfaction chart overleaf, demonstrates that respondents from Phase One of the research demonstrated very high levels of satisfaction with most aspects of their respective occupations.

Chart 6: Phase One Respondents Satisfaction with Employment



They were most satisfied with the location of their employment (74%:64). This finding is of interest as previous research indicates that non-traditional graduates may be less geographically mobile than traditional graduates thus limiting their opportunities (Purcell et al, 2005). The potential to engage in teamwork was also rated as a very satisfactory aspect of their employment by 71% of respondents (62), this was also rated as the most satisfactory aspect of working life for respondents from Phase Two of the research (85%: 29)<sup>18</sup>. Respondents from both phases of the research agree that the potential to make a wider societal and economic contribution was an important dimension to their work (Phase One: 69%: 62, Phase Two: 68%: 23). Furthermore, Phase One respondents emphasised the value placed on their opinions within their work environments (43%: 38), as well as the opportunity to complete challenging work, whereas Phase Two respondents place more importance on the type and range of tasks they complete as part of their employment.

The past decade witnessed massive social and economic growth in Ireland indicated by widespread employment opportunities, as well as corresponding skills shortages (FAS, 2007; EGFSN, 2007; Forfas 2007a; Smyth, 2007). However the economic decline experienced in more recent times (NESC, 2008; CSO, 2009b, Ibid, 2009c; Ibid, 2009e) as well as the fragmented nature of modern forms of graduate employment (Walshe, 2009; Brown and Smetherton, 2005; Layer, 2006;

Brown, 2000; Lavelle et al, 2000; Pearson et al, 1997), may explain why graduates demonstrated less satisfaction with certain dimensions of their respective roles.

The causes of dissatisfaction were similar across both phases of the study however, it was noted that in Phase One the respondents demonstrated the most dissatisfaction with the opportunity for promotion and advancement (27%:24) within their current roles. For Phase Two respondents, the lack of job security afforded by their current roles (41%: 14) was the main cause of dissatisfaction. Interestingly, approximately one third of respondents from Phase One were dissatisfied with their current salary. Considering the respondents salaries were previously noted as being in line with other graduates nationally, this finding may indicate that graduates over estimate the financial return from engaging with higher education. Approximately one quarter of respondents also indicated dissatisfaction with the level of job security afforded by their current role, this finding was reiterated in the qualitative comments.

*My employers undervalue their staff and do not appreciate or utilise their skills. There is barely any chance of advancement, it is monotonous and you do not feel valued or that you are contributing anything of worth (Graduate 115).*

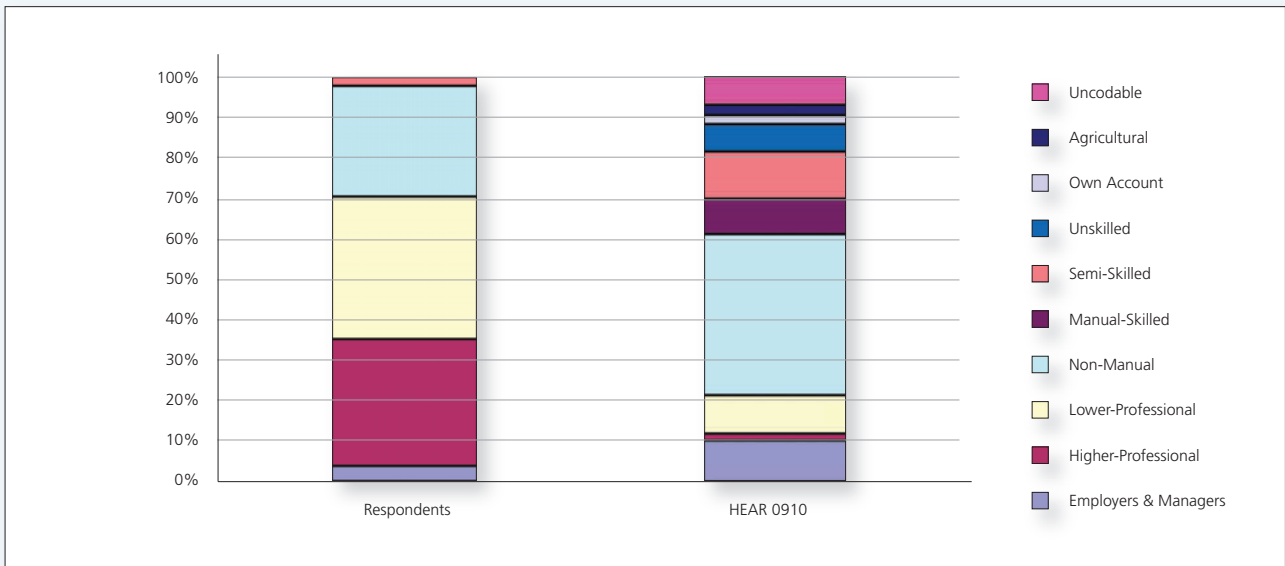
*My work isn't very secure as I don't have a permanent contract, just a contract for one year (Graduate 112).*

*Due to cutbacks in the [sector] I will not get a permanent contract (Graduate 150).*

<sup>18</sup> For the 'Satisfaction with Employment' chart representing responses from Phase Two see Appendix.



Chart 7: Socio-Occupational Group Respondents Compared to HEAR Applicants 2009/10



### Socio-Occupational Profile

From the information the respondents provided in relation to their current employment, it was possible to determine their corresponding socio-occupational group (TAP, 2009a; O’Connell et al, 2006; Clancy and Wall, 2000). When compared to the parent(s)/guardian(s) of HEAR applicants competing for entrance to third-level in the academic year 2009/2010 the chart demonstrates that the respondents most frequently engage in Lower-Professional (35.2%: 45) or Higher-Professional (31.3%: 40) roles, whereas only 1.7% (51) of the parent(s)/guardian(s) of HEAR applicants are represented in the Higher-Professional category. However, it was also noted that approximately one third of respondents are engaged in Non-Manual forms of employment, a similar trend to parent(s)/guardian(s) of HEAR applicants (39.4%: 1181). While the parent(s)/guardian(s) of HEAR applicants are represented across a wider range of socio-occupational groups, the respondents are represented higher up the classificatory system, with no respondents represented in agricultural, or unskilled roles for example.

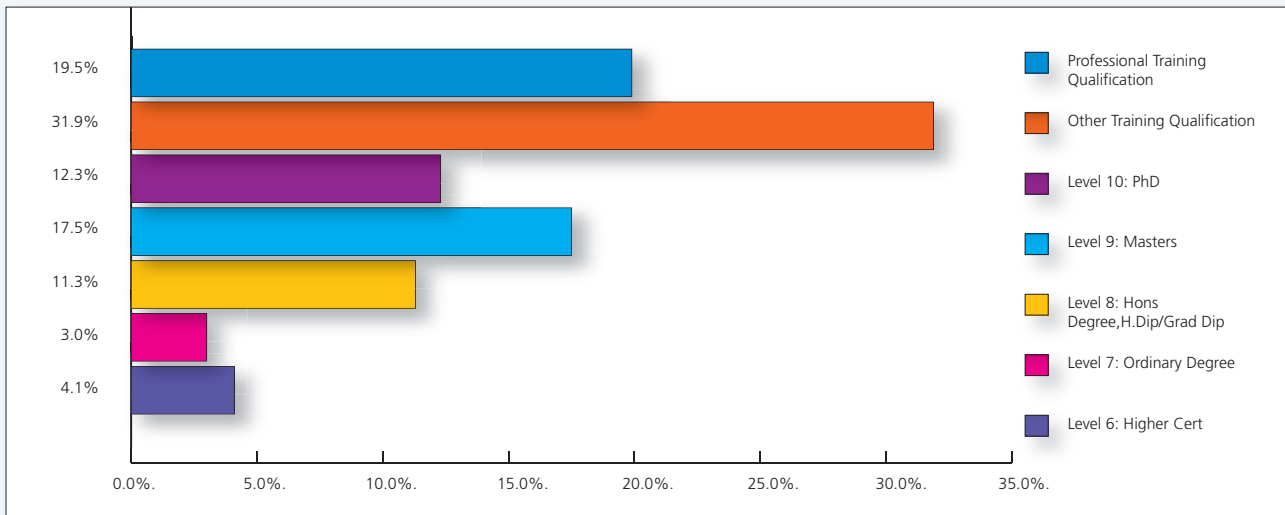
### Employment and Socio-Occupational Profile: Key Findings

- 75% (128) of alumni were employed at the time of data collection
- Pursuing further studies, seeking employment or engaging in home duties are the main activities of graduates not currently employed
- Mirroring national trends, the Education, Health and Healthcare, and the Financial sectors are the main employers of respondents
- The Health and Healthcare sector predominantly employ Young Adults as Social Workers, the Education sector predominantly employs Mature Students as Tutors
- Over half of respondents hold a permanent contract of employment
- Respondents most frequently work a standard 36-40 hour week, overtime is not a key feature of graduate employment at present
- Earnings are in line with national trends with respondents most frequently earning €20-27,999
- Mature Students earnings are in line with national trends
- Young Adults most frequently earn €28-35,999
- Respondents seek employment which appeals to their academic interests, promotes social and economic progress, offers work experience, professional development and financial security
- Particular satisfaction is demonstrated with the location of employment, engaging in teamwork, its wider societal and economic contribution, and the value placed on their opinions within the workplace
- Graduates demonstrate dissatisfaction with the few opportunities for promotion, their earnings, and level of job security
- The respondents engage in employment which is predominantly characterised as Lower-Professional (35.2%: 45).

## Chapter 8:

### Postgraduate and Further Study Profile

Chart 8: Phase One and Two Most Recently Pursued Course



#### Introduction

Postgraduate or professional education/training is considered to give graduates a competitive edge in a knowledge based labour market (Royal Society, 2008; McNaboe and Condon, 2007; Haynes and Metcalfe, 2007; Metcalfe and Gray, 2006; Pollard et al, 2004). Ireland has a higher rate of participation in fourth-level study when compared to OECD averages<sup>19</sup>. The rate of direct progression among graduates with a primary degree to postgraduate studies increased from 25% to 33% of graduates in 2004 (HEA, 2008a; Ibid, 2007; Ibid, 2006; Behan et al, 2007; McNaboe and Condon, 2007), and in 2006, the Irish Government made a strategic commitment to double the rate of PhD attainment by 2013 (DETE, 2006). Therefore it is encouraging that 57% (97) of respondents had progressed to some form of postgraduate/further education or training<sup>20</sup>. This section explores the motivations respondents had for engaging in further study, it profiles the type of further study and explores their general experiences.

#### Motivations for further study

Four different reasons for engaging in further study were identified from the qualitative data. The main reason cited was that an additional qualification was required as a pre-requisite for entry into the established graduate professions for example the pharmaceutical industry, or the legal or medical professions. It is also a mechanism by which respondents believed they could advance within their current role or organisation.

*In order to become a chartered engineer, I must do a certain amount of hours in continued professional development courses each year... (Graduate 78).*

*I had to complete the H.Dip in order to become a qualified teacher (Graduate 9).*

The respondents also engaged in further study or attained a further qualification in an effort to enhance their employability. This was a particularly evident theme in the responses from graduates from Phase Two of the research.

*...It is better to specialise in a particular area of law otherwise you will be competing with hundreds of job candidates with the same qualifications as you, job prospects are low at the minute so it was the right time to continue with education (Graduate 148).*

*I did not get a job in anything relevant to my course so I thought that with a Masters perhaps I would be more employable (Graduate 104).*

Finally, respondents were found to have engaged in further studies for purely academic, personal or societal reasons.

*My goal is to follow a career in academia or university teaching. A PhD is really required to follow this route (Graduate 124).*

*I have completed a course as an adult literacy tutor because this is a course close to my heart and working within it gives me great personal satisfaction. Working as a tutor also allows me to give something back, and moreover gives me an insight into the field of education (Graduate 106).*

<sup>19</sup> The rate of participation for Ireland was 37.4%; while the OECD average was 34.8% (MacNaboe and Condon, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> The progression rate for Phase One was 66% (79) and 36% (18) for Phase Two. It was also apparent that the respondents tend to pursue more than one course of study 24% (29) of respondents from Phase One and 6% (3) from Phase Two indicated this. It was also found that Trinity College was the most frequent course attended once again.

## Most Recently Pursued Courses

As part of Ireland's progress towards becoming a society which promotes a philosophy of lifelong learning, the National Qualifications Authority has aimed to classify and accredit all forms of educational attainment, including employment related training courses. The level and type of further study most recently engaged in by respondents is presented, according to the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)<sup>21</sup>.

The most frequent type of qualification pursued by respondents are those which fall under the category of 'Other Training Qualifications' (31.9%: 31). These courses are predominantly short skills based and employment related ranging from literacy tutoring, to child attachment training, to business sales skills. 'Professional Training Qualifications' (19.5%:19), which assist with progression into established graduate careers such as Law, Pharmacy and Engineering were also found to be popular. 41.1% (40) of respondents were found to have embarked on more traditional forms of postgraduate education, at levels 8, 9, and 10<sup>22</sup>.

## Institutions Attended, Completion Date(s) and Funding Method(s)

It is noteworthy that over a quarter of respondents returned to Trinity to pursue their further education (Phase One: 25%:19, Phase Two: 35%:6). This finding was explored during the focus group session and it emerged that Trinity's academic reputation, as well the students' sense of affinity with the university were key reasons why they chose to pursue further studies in Trinity rather than other institutions.

*If you're gonna go anywhere in Ireland – where else do you go...Trinity just has a better reputation...* (Focus Group Participant 6).

*Familiarity with the place and buildings and surroundings...like you'd be grappling with the library if you went to [another institution] but...here you know where the library is, you know where all the books are, if you went somewhere completely different you'd be lost again* (Focus Group Participant 3).

Within Phase One, 34% (26) of respondents fund their studies directly from their employer. Within Phase Two, the largest percentage of respondents accessed funding from state awarding bodies (45%: 8). This trend is not surprising given that the respondents from Phase One predominantly engaged in employment related training qualifications, and those from Phase Two engaged in traditional postgraduate studies.

## Further Study Progression: Mature Students and Young Adults Compared

Mature Students were observed to mainly pursue short, employment related skills courses. However, eleven Mature Student graduates have pursued courses from Levels 6 to 10, including courses such as higher certificates in teaching, research masters and PhD's.

'Professional Training' courses were mainly associated with Young Adult graduates, which typify pre-requisite training for entry into established graduate professions. When progression to postgraduate courses was analysed, Young Adults most frequently pursued those at Level 9. More Young Adults (Phase One: 6, Phase Two: 4) progress to PhD level study than Mature Students. It was further noted that none of the Mature Students from Phase Two had progressed to postgraduate/further education or training.

The respondents who had not progressed to further study during the time span of the research were asked to outline if they intended to do so during the following academic year. It was found that approximately one third of respondents from each phase of the research intended to continue with their education (Phase One: 32%: 18, Phase Two: 32%: 12)<sup>23</sup>. Reasons for non-pursuit of further study were explored and analysis indicated that for many, the costs associated were prohibitive, that respondents were pursuing other interests, or engaged in work experience and others stated that their current educational qualifications were sufficient.

*...I have to work and save for several years so I can afford to 'live' (pay rent etc) [eventually]...returning to full-time postgraduate education* (Graduate 74).

*I thought on completion of my degree I would have more success in breaking into the film industry and raise money to pay for my Masters. Good Master's courses in film can range from between €6,000 to €18,000* (Graduate 53).

*I decided to take some time out and gain some work experience until I feel ready to undertake a postgraduate course. I would like to commence a postgrad[uate] course in a few years as I still would like to travel before starting a course* (Graduate 108).

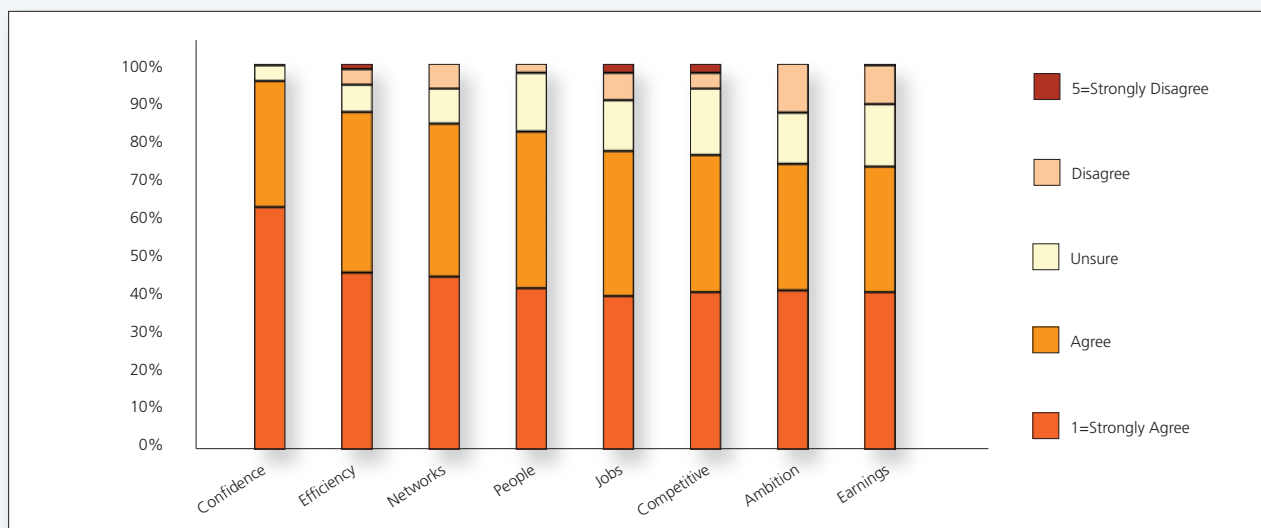
*I have found employment and feel that I've enough qualifications for now [and will] perhaps do further training in a few years...* (Graduate 112).

21 The further study profile of respondents is presented in line with the National Framework for Qualifications 10 Level Framework. Accessible at: <http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/documents/determinations.pdf>. The definition of 'Other Training Qualifications' and 'Professional Training Qualifications' are drawn from TCD's Careers Advisory Service Survey's 'What Do TCD Graduates Do?'

22 Of these, twelve respondents are candidates for the award of PhD; they are represented across the Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, as well as the Science and Medical fields.

23 Respondents from Phase Two who intended to engage in further studies in the following year were predominantly Mature Students.

Chart 9: Phase One Range of Benefits of Further Study



However, the focus group participants highlighted that strong rates of progression to further studies may not necessarily indicate that every graduate had ambitions toward further study. Rather, they suggested that some graduates may use further study as a means by which to avoid a gap in their employment history. In this way engagement with further studies was seen as a tactical move in the face of limited opportunities.

*I think a lot of people do a postgraduate [course], like [my] friends and that are doing it for a stop-gap for a year or two because they cant get work...*(Focus Group Participant 5).

*[Group participant to other participant] We actually said we'd apply for one, didn't we – if we didn't get a job* (Focus Group Participant 3).

### Merits of Further Study

The respondents were asked to consider the benefits of further educational progression after their undergraduate degree, and responded to a number of statements exploring the benefits of engaging in further study relating to personal, social and employment opportunities (1=Strongly Agree, 5= Strongly Disagree). The above figure demonstrates that graduates have benefitted on many levels. The graduates from Phase One<sup>24</sup> indicated it had increased their confidence in their skills and abilities (94%:65), whereas graduates from Phase Two considered further study to have enhanced their competitiveness in the current labour market (89%: 15). It was noted that 87% (59) of respondents from Phase One report being more efficient in their ability to complete multiple tasks. Yet respondents from Phase Two indicated that for them, engaging in further study was an educational ambition (82%: 14) as well as an opportunity to network in their field (76%: 13).

The respondents also agreed that the pursuit/achievement of additional qualifications increased their ability to earn a higher income, as well as enhanced their ability to locate potential

employment opportunities. Therefore the benefits of further study beyond that of enhancing their level of education and the knowledge typically acquired during this process are that it also provides graduates with an opportunity to assess current labour market trends and establish valuable contacts through networking opportunities, thus enhancing their employability.

### Postgraduate and Further Study Profile: Key Findings

A detailed profile of the postgraduate and further educational careers of TAP graduates was compiled including the motivating factors as to why they pursue further studies. The barriers preventing graduates from engaging in further study were also explored. Together the key points from this section are outlined and demonstrated that:

- 57% (97) of participants have progressed to at least one course of further study (Phase One: 66%: 79, Phase Two: 36%: 18)
- The most recent courses completed by graduates were predominantly employment related skills development courses, and professional development courses
- Twelve graduates have commenced PhD studies, of whom two are Mature Students
- Respondents most frequently returned to Trinity College to pursue further studies due to a sense of affinity to, and familiarity with, the university
- Graduates most frequently secure funding for their course from their employer or from the State
- A number of motivations for engaging with further study were highlighted such as to gain a competitive edge in the labour market, enhance confidence, develop existing skills set, to network, and to fulfil an academic ambition
- Reasons for non-pursuit of further study are related to the associated financial costs, pursuit of other interests, and gaining work experience. It was also noted that respondents deemed their current qualification as sufficient.

<sup>24</sup> For the benefits of engaging with further study chart for Phase Two see Appendix.

## Chapter 9

### Trinity Access Programmes Alumni Strategy (TAPAS)

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#### Introduction

An aim of the research was that it would practically inform programme development in TAP in the area of alumni progression. In the widening participation field, models of good practice for engaging with students and corporate interests to promote equality of outcomes for third-level students from non-traditional backgrounds are common across the HEI sector in the UK. As highlighted in the literature review, enhancing the employability of these groups is also a key feature of these strategies (University of Edinburgh, 2008; Watts, 2006; Layer, 2006; Yorke, 2003; Purcell, et al, 2002; Clutterbuck, 2003; Bowes and Harvey, 1999). To aid in this process, the respondents were asked to outline what they thought the College could do to assist current undergraduates to better prepare for the graduate labour market and progression to postgraduate/further study. They suggested that undergraduates should begin career planning by using college careers services earlier in their undergraduate studies, and that the students would benefit from professional work experience. The findings also highlight that any potential programme development should be a collaborative process involving the careers services and graduate employers.

*Advise [students] to take every opportunity to explore their career opportunities through early discussion with their careers advisors (Graduate 67).*

*... Let current undergrad[uates] know that in many cases being a graduate doesn't mean a job will fall from the sky – they need to make lots of effort and be very, very patient (Graduate 107).*

*[Students should] pursue as many job opportunities as possible, many of us think there is a job waiting for us when finished – this is not the case (Graduate 133).*

*...Encourage [students] to try and get work experience in their area of interest as it makes it much easier when you leave college to have this practical experience and it shows they have been proactive (Graduate 4).*

*[Put undergraduates in touch with] contacts for jobs in their specific field (Graduate 30).*

These suggestions mirror those implemented by UK universities and indicate that TAP should aim to incorporate programme content which would support students in becoming third-level graduates, for example career planning at key stages of undergraduate study (Ward et al, 2006; Carter et al, 2003) and the establishment of a graduate mentor link (Clutterbuck, 2003). It was further recommended that TAP collaborate with graduate employers to offer work experience or work shadowing programmes to students (Thomas and Jones, 2007; Little et al, 2001; Harvey, 1999).

#### Conclusion

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A proposed strategy for programme development within the area of alumni progression has been outlined. The proposed development of this initiative has been uniquely informed by the graduates who participated in the research, and is, as such, an evidenced based model of good practice for the development of this strategy. It is also pertinent that each of these recommendations is supported by an expansive body of research and literature in the widening participation arena.

## Chapter 10

### Conclusions and Recommendations

#### Conclusions

The study sought to profile the employment and further study experiences of the TAP graduate population of Trinity College Dublin including the cohorts from 2001/2002 to 2006/2007, and 2007/2008. In previous studies it was demonstrated that disadvantage once experienced by under-represented groups in the educational sector can extend to labour market participation for graduates from non-traditional backgrounds. Drawing from a wide range of indicators the report demonstrated that respondents who participated in the study have enjoyed a high level of success, as well as satisfaction with their professional and further educational experiences thus far. They outlined that their pursuit of third-level studies in the first instance informed their decisions in a professional capacity and they emphasised that academic fulfilment, personal ambition as well as the opportunity to effect social change through professional employment were the main reasons they engaged in academic studies through the Trinity Access Programmes.

In acknowledgment of wider research evidence, an assessment of labour market disadvantage was conducted, investigating the extent to which it may have affected the experiences of respondents. Consistently high employment levels were found across each phase of the research averaging 75% (128). The majority of respondents deem their employment to be typical of third-level graduates, and have roles which they find fulfilling but which also allow them to draw upon their skill set and gain experience. The respondents also highlighted that the potential to establish and build a meaningful career which makes a positive contribution to society was important to them. Mature Students in this study indicated they had some difficulties in making the transition from university to professional life. The data provided in this report demonstrated that there is a difference in the rate of employment when Young Adult and Mature Student respondents are compared. However it was also found that Mature Students overcame initial difficulties to gain employment typical of third-level graduates.

The research demonstrated that when types of graduate employment are classified according to Clancy and Wall's (2000) socio-occupational system, the respondents are most frequently engaged in Lower-Professional roles followed closely by those engaged in Higher-Professional employment. This represents a marked difference from the socio-occupational background of HEAR applicants where approximately two percent of HEAR applicants had a parent/guardian in the Higher-Professional category.

Research has indicated that non-traditional graduates do not present to graduate employers with the right 'set' of skills (Hills, 2002). Graduates in this study acknowledged that they

had few networks to draw upon in establishing a career path, and generally lack professional work experience which is known to be desired by graduate recruiters. They outlined that these issues hampered their progress initially. However, the participants in the main rejected the assertion that various individual, social and educational attributes significantly hindered their labour market and career progression. To the contrary, the majority of participants believed that they possess what recruiters look for in graduates, namely a strong academic record, the ability to work in a team and to demonstrate initiative as well as efficiency.

Progression to further study was found to be consistently high across each phase of the study with an average of 57% (97) of respondents engaged in at least one further course of study. Twelve participants have pursued PhD studies. When further study attainment patterns of Mature Student and Young Adult graduates were compared, the Mature Students were found to be more likely to pursue short skills enhancing courses, while Young Adults pursue more professionally oriented qualifications. However Young Adults and Mature Students are also represented across the higher categories of the NFQ with a particular trend toward engaging in courses at Level 8, 9 and 10. The respondents also indicated that they benefited in a number of ways from engaging in further study. Their self-confidence was clearly enhanced, and their knowledge of wider labour market trends increased. It was also highlighted that further study provided the graduates with an opportunity to build professional networks as well as to enhance their employability. However strong progression rates to further study may be due to respondents engaging in further study as a tactical manoeuvre in order to avoid the wider economic climate, and the threat of unemployment.

As outlined, the respondents have progressed well both within a professional and educational capacity. It was acknowledged however that the respondents developed awareness in retrospect of the attributes they needed to enhance their employability, particularly within a market which they characterise as increasingly competitive. Drawing on these experiences they reiterated the importance of early career planning, building a history of work experience in professional environments, as well as establishing networks in the field in which they wish to progress into. These suggestions support the strategies implemented by other widening participation practitioners, which assist students to enhance their employability once they reach graduate status.

This report details 'What Happened Next?' for Trinity's TAP graduates. It highlights that through the development of access routes as part of the widening participation agenda in Trinity College, these talented students were able to fulfil their academic potential and personal ambitions. The findings also demonstrate that the students predominantly engage in work which has a clear societal benefit. One of the most pertinent findings is that the educational system itself benefits from these students engagement with higher education, as many return to work within this sector.

## Recommendations

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A wealth of information has been drawn upon in formulating the recommendations for policy and programme development within the area of access to education and alumni progression. The study highlighted international models of good practice which have been effective at widening participation for under-represented groups in higher education, while simultaneously working to enhance and promote diversity within established graduate professions. These, together with the suggestions outlined by the graduates inform the following recommendations;

- The study clearly identifies that a model for development within non-traditional graduate progression should incorporate career development, mentoring and work experience/shadowing strands to enable participating students to enhance their employability
- The Trinity Access Programmes should collaborate with graduate employers to build this model
- An introductory careers session, should be incorporated into the Post Entry Progression Programme content for Junior Freshman students, giving them an early introduction to the importance of early career planning
- TAP and CAS should collaborate to develop a career guidance module specifically for Mature Students which should be incorporated into the existing TAP Foundation Course for Higher Education syllabus containing elements relating to career guidance, particularly CV development and interviewing techniques.

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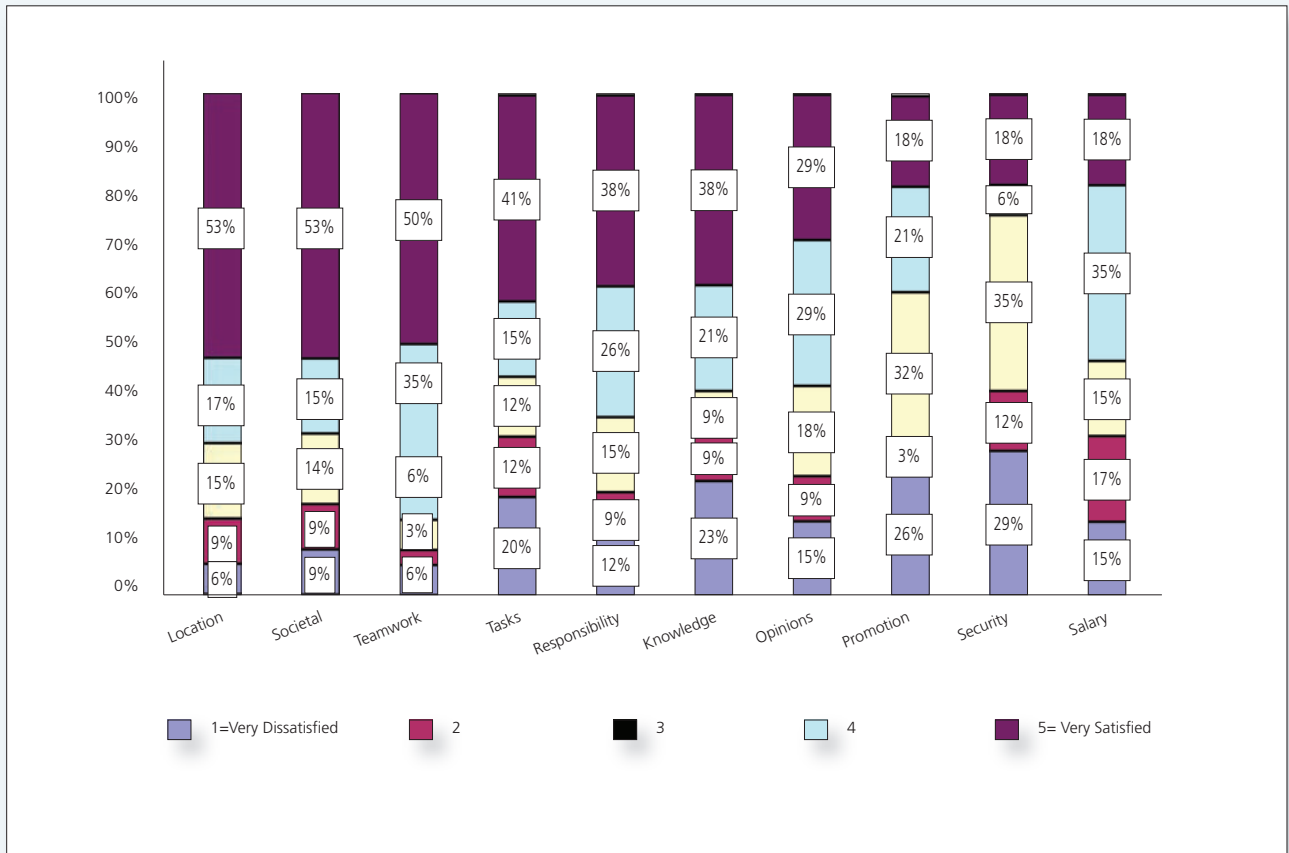
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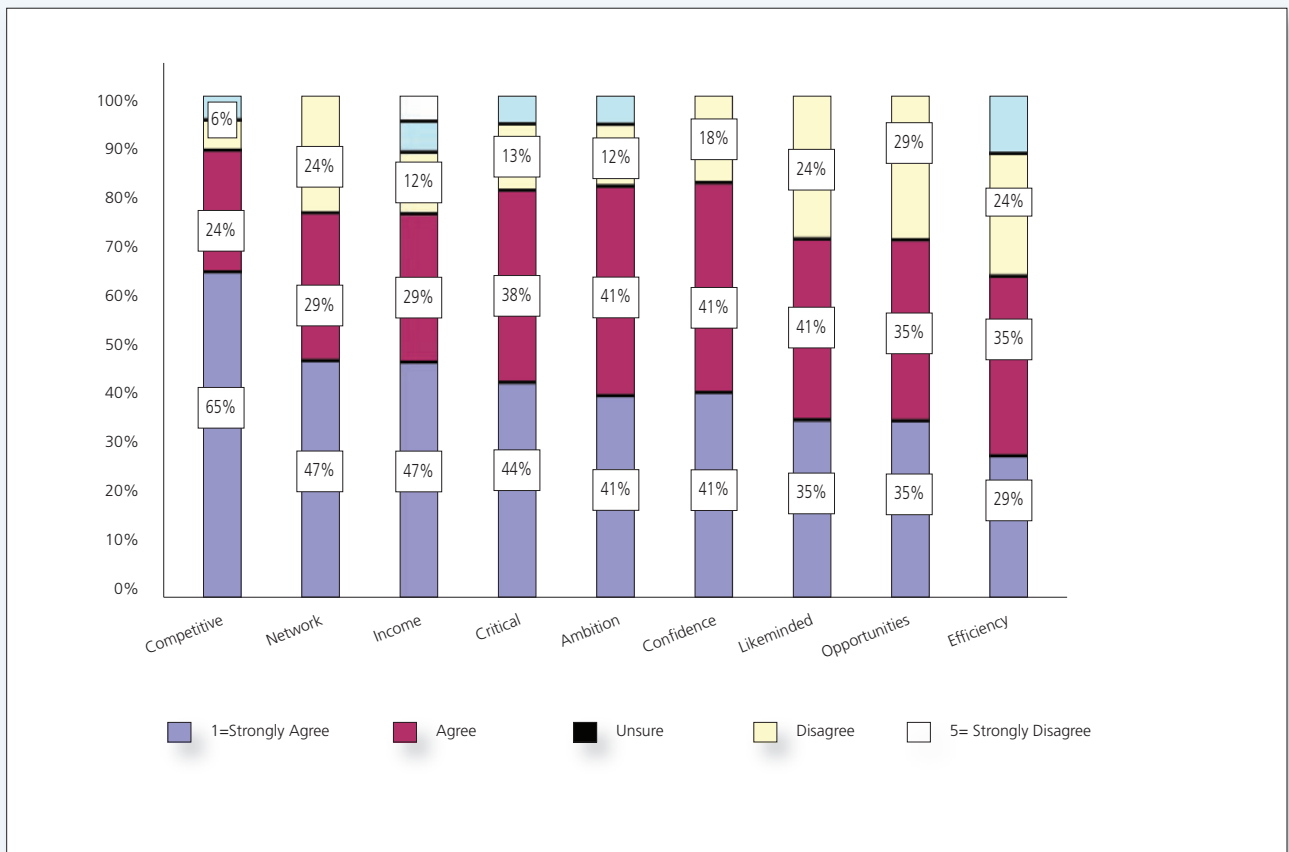


# Appendices

## Phase Two: Graduates' Satisfaction with Employment



## Phase Two: Benefits of Engaging in Further Study









Ireland's EU Structural Funds  
Programmes 2007 - 2013  
Co-funded by the Irish Government  
and the European Union

