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**Equality of access to higher education:  
discussion of emerging issues regarding the performance of migrants at  
the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown**

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## **Introduction<sup>2</sup>**

This paper presents the findings of a small scale study of the impact of English language competency on the performance of migrants in higher education in Ireland. It is based on a case study of a group of first year Social Studies students at the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB). First, relevant terminology will be outlined before focusing on the promotion of equality in higher education by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) – the framework within which the data will subsequently be critiqued. Next, the presence of migrants in the Institutes of Technology (IOTs) will be discussed, before presenting the findings of the quantitative analysis of the ITB students' end of year results, in addition to the qualitative analysis of data from the lecturers' surveys and interviews with students. The emerging issues will be discussed before finally drawing conclusions in the context of equality of access to higher education.

## **Terminology**

This case study considers the performance of migrants, a catch-all term that encompasses internal diversity. Migrants are hugely diverse in linguistic terms: they are not all non-native speakers of English, and amongst those who are, their proficiency varies considerably. The HEA uses the terms 'Irish' and 'non-Irish' students in referring to students at third level. This terminology does not allow for distinguishing between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of English, or between 'international' fee-paying or Erasmus students, and students from migrant backgrounds. Since ITB's number of 'international students', namely students usually resident outside of Ireland who come here on a student visa to study on a fee paying basis (Warner 2006, p.8), remains very low, 'migrants', who constitute the vast majority of ITB's non-Irish student population, are the focus of this study.

## **The promotion of equality of access in the higher education sector**

Education systems tend to reproduce existing inequalities in the wider society and these inequalities are most evident in higher education (Linehan & Hogan 2008). Despite the promotion of equality of opportunity constituting one of the core functions of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2008, p.14), inequality pervades in higher education in Ireland. While recognising immigration as a 'key emerging challenge in the context of equality of education' (HEA 2008, p.37), the current *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013* does not include specific action points relating to ethnicity, given the dearth of official educational data in this respect at the time of its development. This is since

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being addressed through the Equal Access Data Collection, while the study of progression in higher education considers the impact of nationality (Irish/non-Irish), as one of the student characteristics, on student progression (Mooney *et al* 2010). However, as will be discussed subsequently, the data that is being collected does not enable the identification of non-native speakers of English. The National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education's understanding of the concept 'access' includes retention and successful completion, as well as entry to higher education (HEA 2008, p.14), more akin to 'equality of outcomes' than 'equality of opportunities' (Baker *et al* 2004, p.21).

### **Language a barrier to education**

Language has been identified as a barrier to the provision of higher education opportunities to immigrants (Warner 2006, Dunbar 2008, HEA 2008). In their study on *Migrants and Higher Education*, Linehan & Hogan (2008, p.106) note 'the majority of those interviewed identified the lack of spoken and written English language skills as a major barrier to entering higher education and a fundamental barrier against fuller integration'. A lack of any systematic or integrated approach to language support at third level has been identified (Ní Chonaill forthcoming).

### **Migrants in the IOTs?**

According to the HEA Equal Access survey of 2011/2012, the proportion of new entrants, at undergraduate level, from non-Irish ethnic backgrounds tends to be higher in the IOTs than Universities. A considerable proportion of non-Irish nationals studying in Ireland do so in the fields of Social Science, Business and Law (Census 2011). Social science programmes and business programmes are particularly well represented in the IOT sector.

The IOTs may also attract migrant students precisely because of the fact that they are different to the universities. Keogh & Whyte (2003, p.9) report on research in the UK which found that:

Former polytechnic institutions in large urban areas and subjects with a more vocational focus have a greater concentration of ethnic minority students ... this may be because such students positively decide to attend institutions which they perceive to be more 'friendly' as well as being nearer family and other support networks.

### **Access to IOTs**

There are also more educational reasons why IOTs may take in more migrants than the university sector. It is more difficult for students from non-English speaking backgrounds to attain the points required for University programmes. An OECD policy review group noted the 'privilege of fee-paying schools in feeding universities' (2009, p.4) in Ireland and the low level of immigrant students attending these.

The disadvantage of engaging with the examinations process through a second language is also seen to impact on points, with many educationalists agreeing that students whose first language is not English may be under-achieving at Leaving Certificate level. Keogh & Whyte (2003) interviewed teachers at second level and reported a number of issues. Initially, they established a link between language and achievement: 'due to language difficulties, some immigrant students were not able to show their ability or achieve their potential' (p.48). This took on even greater importance in the area of formal assessment: 'teachers mentioned how examinations seem to test students' language skills rather than their ability or their knowledge of subject areas' (p.49). In a study by Lyons & Little (2009, p.62), teachers

identified issues for NNS both in terms of the readability of the examination papers, and issues of structure and format which prevented NNS students performing to the best of their ability.

### **Entry requirements**

While international students may need to provide evidence of a score of 6.0 or more on IELTS - which is equivalent to B2 on the Council of Europe Framework –to enter higher education, students from migrant backgrounds only need ordinary Leaving Certificate English, which one language support teacher estimated to be achievable at a much lower level of A2 (Thompson 2010).

Keogh & Whyte (2003, p.9) note that another reason that the former polytechnic universities attracted more migrant students was that ‘these universities accept greater numbers of students with non-standard entry qualifications, and ethnic minority groups are more likely to fall into this category’. This may also be true for the IOT sector. Access agreements with FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) allow students to gain entry to undergraduate courses on the basis of points attained on Level 5 awards. Entry on to FETAC courses can be secured with minimum Leaving Certificate results or even the Leaving Certificate Applied (CAO 2013). A considerable proportion of students in Social Sciences in IOTs come through the FETAC route.

### **The ITB context**

ITB is located in Dublin 15, home to one of the highest proportions of migrants nationwide. 23.8% of the area’s population were recorded as non-Irish nationals in the 2011 census (Ryan 2012), almost double the national average of 12% (CSO 2012). ITB’s student population reflects the diversity of its immediate catchment area: in 2012/2013 non-Irish nationals, coming from 89 different countries, comprised 19.73% of the student body (ITB 2013).

### **Methodology**

A mixed methods approach was used for this case study. A group of first year students on a Social Studies programme were purposively chosen as the sample. The students’ end of year academic results were analysed quantitatively using a two-sample t-test and triangulated with a qualitative analysis of data from lecturers who taught the students (questionnaires) and the students themselves (interviews). Lecturers for this cohort of students were asked to complete a questionnaire which focused on general issues relating to the group, on how NNS engaged with the programme compared to NS and finally on issues with written production for these students. Eight lecturers returned completed questionnaires. The NNS students were subsequently interviewed as regards their experience of the impact of English language competency on their performance.

### **Findings**

#### ***Access***

Of the 8 NNS participants chosen for this small-scale study out of a class of 77 students, 1 accessed the course following the completion of a Leaving Certificate, 2 entered as mature students and, the largest number, namely 5, entered the course through the FETAC route. In addition to highlighting the various entry routes onto such a programme, this cohort is reflective of the considerable proportion of students in Social Sciences in the IOTs coming through non-standard entry routes, such as FETAC, as alluded to above.

### ***Identification***

Lecturers were uncertain about the numbers of NNS in class with estimates from 5% to 10%. A key issue that emerged was how to pinpoint these students who are not currently identifiable through the data collected by the HEA or ITB. Most lecturers reported identifying these NNS students initially during tutorials and when correcting written work. Lecturers found this cohort of students quite diverse, both in terms of general ability and language competence, which is reflected in their end of year results. They also noted a mix of younger and mature students.

### ***Performance: end of year results***

At the end of the first year of the programme, taking into consideration both summer and autumn examination results, 4 of the 8 NNS (50%) and 53 of the 69 NS (76.8%) successfully completed first year of the programme<sup>3</sup>. The results of a two-sample t-test of students' Grade Point Average (GPA) shows a difference between the means, but insufficient evidence of a statistical significance between the two results ( $p=0.267$ ). However, removing the highest scoring of the NNS from the sample yielded a statistically significant difference in GPA between groups ( $p=0.049$ ) which suggests this as a high influence data point, and additionally suggests that the issue deserves further investigation with a bigger sample.

### ***Issues impacting performance***

As highlighted earlier, migrants are hugely diverse in terms of English language competency. In comparing NNS to NS, some lecturers commented that it was difficult to generalise as there was quite a range of abilities among the cohort. One lecturer noted: 'In spite of English not being their first language - many are mature students with better overall language skills than their NS classmates'. While all lecturers agreed that there was a significant issue with NNS students' understanding materials presented in lectures, written production was the area which caused most concern and was felt would impact most on results.

With regard to written language production lecturers noted few issues around general and specific vocabulary, but reported problems with grammatical endings, and sentence and paragraph construction. One student, aware of such problems, spoke of the impact of answering examination questions in English: 'there wouldn't be enough time for me to make some changes. You just let it be as you don't have time to make such corrections'. The higher order skills such as comparing and contrasting information, and building arguments proved far more challenging for NNS. Another student spoke of 'lack of practice' to master skills such as comparing and contrasting.

While NNS of English may have acquired adequate levels of conversational English, they may find academic work very challenging. Linehan and Hogan (2008, p.75) note evidence that: 'Even where students present with the necessary qualifications and standards, as demonstrated through tests such as IELTS, the demands of academic English were seen to be very challenging for any student for whom English was not his/her mother tongue.' One student spoke of her friends from non-English speaking countries' experience of academic writing: 'they struggle a lot, they find it very hard'. While students were seen to perform well in oral presentations, in written assignments NNS students were seen to have some issues with paraphrasing, commenting on and referencing sources, and avoiding plagiarism.

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<sup>3</sup> Only new entrants for 2012/13 who were considered in the summer and autumn examination boards were included in the study. A GPA of 2.0 is required to successfully progress from year one to year two, in addition to 60 credits.

Increasingly, we are encountering students who have completed their second level education in Ireland who may sound fluent but have considerable underlying deficits in English. Educational psychologist Jim Cummins (1984) would contend that while Basic Interpersonal Communications Skills (BICS) will be acquired by a migrant child immersed in a school setting with language support in approximately two years, it may take between five and seven years for a child to acquire Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Thus, for migrant students to successfully transfer to upper second level and higher education, they require 'longer support to achieve mastery of academic English' (Taguma *et al.*, 2009, p.9), than the two years traditionally provided at second level in Ireland. This subsequently has implications for third level. The agreement among educationalists regarding the possibility of NNS underachieving at leaving Certificate level, highlighted earlier, is also applicable to higher education. One of the students interviewed spoke of the impact of a language deficit: 'they (NNS) don't fail because they don't know but because they are not expressing themselves in the right way'. Similar to Lyons & Little's (2009) findings, students' results were not always an accurate reflection of their effort or the knowledge they had gained, as one lecturer remarked 'a number of the non-native speakers had put in a lot of work but problems with structuring their essay and an over-emphasis on direct quotations impacted negatively on their marks in their essays'.

## Conclusion

While the sample of NNS for this study was very small, a number of issues have emerged from the analysis. The HEA has identified immigrants as a group whose needs merits consideration. While access to higher education does not appear to be an issue, with seven of the eight NNS coming through a non-standard entry route, the inequalities do not emerge until the end of the academic year. While the results of the quantitative analysis were not statistically significant, there was a difference between the means and 50% of the NNS did not successfully progress to second year. In terms of performance, problems regarding written production and mastery of academic English were discussed, factors which impact on examination performance. Migrant students underachieving in higher education due to language issues is a shortfall which can follow them throughout the course of their studies. Hence equality of opportunity is not being realized in terms of certain students progressing to postgraduate studies or indeed accessing the labour market. Indeed, an ESRI study found that language skills are positively linked to earnings: migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds are subjected to an occupational gap, whereas this is not the case for those from English-speaking backgrounds (O'Connell and McGinnity, 2008). While NNS have a diverse range of abilities, there is no current means of identifying those for whom English language competency is seriously impacting performance. With an increase of generation 1.5 (Roberge *et al* 2009) coming through the system this is an issue that is set to have an increased impact on the IOT sector. One NNS, referring to her four colleagues who did not progress, spoke of the need for 'early intervention' as when the results come out it is too late. Considering equality of access as including successful completion this is an area that deserves further investigation in the Irish context.

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