Inequality in the Irish higher education system: a case study of the the views of migrant students and their lecturers on how English language proficiency impacts their academic achievement in an Institute of Technology

Ruth Harris
Institute of Technology Bloanchardstown, ruth.harris@itb.ie

Brid Ni Chonaill
Institute of Techynology Blanchardstown, brid.nichonaill@tudublin.ie

Inequality in the Irish higher education system: a case study of the views of migrant students and their lecturers on how English language proficiency impacts their academic achievement in an Institute of Technology

Ruth Harris
Institute of Technology Blanchardstown
ruth.harris@itb.ie

Bríd Ní Chonaill
Institute of Technology Blanchardstown
Brid.NiChonaill@itb.ie

Abstract

This article presents the findings of a case study which explored how English language competency may impact on the academic achievement of migrant students in higher education in Ireland. The research was conducted on a group of first year Social Studies students at an Institute of Technology. A qualitative approach was used as data was analysed from questionnaires completed by lecturers, and interviews with non-native speakers of English on the impact of language competency on their performance. The emerging issues in the context of language impacting on equality of opportunity for students from migrant backgrounds include firstly the higher likelihood of gaining access to institutes of technology rather than universities; secondly, English language deficits become particularly apparent in the area of academic writing and engagement does not always translate into successful outcomes in the examination process; thirdly, underperformance at third level will also impact on opportunities to pursue postgraduate studies and accessing the labour market. The main inequality identified in this article is one of outcomes rather than of opportunities.

Keywords

Migrants; performance; higher education; English language proficiency

Introduction

This article presents the findings of a case study, which explored how English language competency may impact on the academic achievement of migrant students in higher education in Ireland. The research was conducted on a group of first year Social Studies students at an Institute of Technology (IOT) in 2013. First, the rationale for the study 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 higher education in Ireland and in the IOTs more specifically will be discussed. Then the research method will be delineated, namely data was collected from lecturers using a questionnaire and migrant students were interviewed regarding the impact of English language competency on their performance. The issues that emerged from the findings will then be discussed before finally drawing conclusions in the context of equality and inequality within the higher education system in Ireland.

Rationale for the study

The IOT in question is located in an urban area, home to one of the highest proportions of migrants in Ireland. 23.8% of the area's population were recorded as non-Irish nationals in the last census (Ryan, 2012), almost double the national average of 12% (CSO, 2012). The IOT's student population reflects the diversity of its immediate catchment area: non-Irish nationals, coming from 89 different countries, comprised 19.73% of the student body in 2013 (N. Johnson, personal communication, November 10, 2013). Given the data collection system, these figures do not include migrants who subsequently become naturalised Irish citizens.

The county in which the IOT is located, which constitutes part of its catchment area, has experienced similar demographic changes. According to research conducted, the area has a much higher percentage of foreign nationals for whom English is a second language, compared to the provincial or national picture: "for the vast majority of non-Irish nationals residing there (est. 91% based on national statistics from Census 2006), English is a second language" (Collier Broderick, 2008, p. 9).

The aim of this case study is to examine the views of migrant students and their lecturers on how English language proficiency impacts their academic achievement in their first year on an academic programme in an IOT. Given the striking levels of inward migration that Ireland experienced, particularly between 1996 and 2008 (CSO, 2011), attention has been directed towards its impact on the education system. The main state response has been investment in English language support at primary and post-primary level and the commissioning of research on the impact of migration on these sectors (for example McGorman and Sugrue (2007); Smyth, Darmody, McGinnity, and Byrne (2009)). Since issues around migration have attracted less attention in the higher education sector, the focus of this article is to contribute to a greater understanding of these issues.

Promoting equality in higher education in Ireland

Education systems tend to reproduce existing inequalities in the wider society and, as Linehan and Hogan argue, these inequalities are "most apparent in higher education" (2008, p. 17). Legislative reforms adopted from the late 1990s in Ireland have established equality as a guiding principle of Irish education. The Equal Status Act 2000 prohibits educational establishments from discriminating on nine grounds including race. In relation to the higher education sector, equality features both in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, which is relevant to the IOTs and the further education sector, and the Universities Act 1997 (Linehan and Hogan, 2008, p. 5).

The objective of realising "equity of access to higher education", which has constituted a longstanding national priority of Irish education policy, is embedded in principles of equality and social inclusion (HEA, 2015, p. 14). "Social cohesion, cultural development and equity at national and regional levels" constitutes the second of four national priorities listed in the Department of Education and Skills' *Higher Education System Performance Framework (SPF) 2014-2016*, while key system objective 2 involves the promotion of "access for disadvantaged groups and to put in place coherent pathways from second level, from further education and other non-traditional entry routes" (DES, 2014, p. 2).

The promotion of equality of opportunity in the higher education sector has also been essential to the role of the HEA[i] since its establishment in 1971 (HEA, 2015, p. 3). The HEA established a National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education in 2003, now called the National Access Policy Office. The overall goal of access policy in higher education, outlined in the

recent *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* is "to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population" (HEA, 2015, p. 6). This echoes the Bologna Process at a European level, designed to create a European Higher Education Area, which involved commitments to focus on the social dimension of higher education, including social inclusion. In a bid to ensure that higher education is more representative of society, the National Office prioritise under-represented groups.[ii] While some non-native speakers of English may feature in the under-represented categories for which there are already targets, such as mature students or those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage or further education award holders, the 2015-2019 plan does not list any other ethnic minority outside of Travellers as a targeted group (HEA, 2015, p. 34).

It is important to note that the National Office'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, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh, 2004, p. 21). While students from target groups are accessing higher education, there has been an increase in non-progression rates (HEA, 2014). Internationally there has been increased focus on how students perform post entry within the higher education sector and this policy shift has been reflected in Ireland (Liston et al., 2016, p. 9). Progression or retention within higher education is linked to other crucial/fundamental matters in higher education including the promotion of equality (Liston et al., 2016, p. 9).

Migrants within the higher education system
We use the term migrant, a catch-all term which encompasses internal diversity, conscious that it constitutes a social construction. 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. Furthermore, it does not distinguish between 'international' fee-paying or Erasmus students, and students from migrant backgrounds, including those who become naturalized Irish citizens. The number of 'international students' studying at the IOT in question, namely students usually resident outside of Ireland who come here on a student visa to study on a fee paying basis (Warner, 2006), was very low when the main data was collected in 2013. While these have subsequently increased, first generation migrants, who still constitute the vast majority of this IOT's non-Irish student population, are the focus of this case study.

In its list of key challenges raised in the consultation prior to developing the previous *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013*, the HEA included the "need to have special regard to the needs of recent immigrants" (2008, p. 11). In light of Ireland's increased diversity in terms of nationality and ethnicity, the plan outlined how it will be "vital for the education system to reflect and accommodate that diversity", which it describes as an "immediate challenge at school level" and sure to become a "key higher education issue in the near future" (HEA, 2008, p. 37). The audit conducted of the Equal Access Survey in 2010 cited the percentage of students from specific minority ethnic and cultural backgrounds across higher education, however the HEA has acknowledged the lack of precise targets for participation by any of the sub-groups involved and has described the function of the data as merely to "inform future policy work in the area" (HEA, 2010, p. 15). The last three studies on progression in higher education considered the impact of nationality (Irish/non-Irish) as one of the student

characteristics on student progression (Mooney, Patterson, O'Connor and Chantler, (2010); Patterson and Prendeville, (2014); Liston et al., (2016)).

The latest *Study of Progression in Higher Education 2012/13 to 2013/14* has identified the existence of a relationship in the IOTs between nationality and non-progression: the difference in progression rates between Irish and non-Irish students is statistically significant since non-Irish nationals are less likely to progress to the following year than their Irish counterparts (p<0.05) (Liston et al., 2016, p. 33). Evidence of the same relationship was not found in the university sector where nationality did not influence non-progression rates. However, as has been highlighted above, the data that is being collected does not enable the identification of non-native speakers of English and language barriers are recognised as one of the complex issues linked to providing higher educational opportunities to immigrants.

Language as a barrier to education
Research conducted recently has mixed conclusions on whether international students (taken to be NNS) underperform in higher education (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, and Kommers, 2011, p. 686). In the literature academic adjustment issues experienced by international students generally concentrate on language difficulties (Andrade, 2006). In her review of empirical research related to the adjustment and academic achievement of international students in higher education in English speaking countries, Andrade found that language competency does indeed impact international students' academic performance, although the results fluctuate (2006, p. 148). The research showed that while undergraduate students' academic performance was less influenced by English language competency than that of post-graduates, it nonetheless had a "modest effect" on their performance (Andrade, 2006, p. 148). English language test scores and good writing skills were found to be positively correlated with academic performance.

In Ireland language is recognised as one of the main barriers to higher education for migrants, although not the sole one (Warner, 2006; Dunbar, 2008; HEA, 2008). All of Warner's interviewees recognised lack of knowledge of English as a "major barrier" to access to further and higher education for non-EU students, with quite a number identifying it as "the main issue" (2006, p. 45). In their study on *Migrants and Higher Education*, Linehan and Hogan (2008, p. 3) note that "low levels of English language competence" were recognised by all three sets of interviewees, (i.e. migrants themselves, Access and Admissions Officers in third level colleges, and employers or other key stakeholders) as a "major barrier" to higher education. Indeed the migrant participants were in agreement that difficulties with the English language in fact constituted the "single greatest factor in terms of access to education and employment in Ireland" (Linehan and Hogan, 2008, p. 44).

Even after students enter higher education some experience difficulties understanding lectures due to factors such as accents, colloquialisms, subject-specific vocabulary or the speed of delivery (Warner, 2006, p. 17). Language proficiency was recognised as one of the primary reasons justifying why students "drop out" of academic programmes (Warner, 2006, p. 47). The Access and Admissions Officers in Linehan and Hogan's study corroborated this as they found that even when migrant students presented themselves with the necessary standard of English based on IELTS (International English Language Testing System), "the demands of academic English" were seen to be "very challenging" for any student who is a non-native speaker of English (2008, p. 75). Several interviewees vehemently believed that the solution regarding the issue of language proficiency did not reside at third level but rather the focus needed to shift to a coherent national policy on teaching English as a second language at second

level (Warner, 2006, p. 45). Moreover a need for help with academic English for migrants within the higher education sector was identified, with many recognising the need for more specialised English language provision, particularly discipline-specific English classes (Linehan and Hogan, 2008). In terms of the higher education sector's response to the impact of migration and internationalisation, a lack of any systematic or integrated approach to language support at third level has been identified (Ní Chonaill, 2014).

Migrants in the IOTs

According to the HEA Equal Access Survey of 2011/2012 (2013), the proportion of new entrants, at undergraduate level, from non-Irish ethnic backgrounds tends to be higher in the IOTs than in Universities. In the last census the most popular fields of study for non-Irish nationals was found to be Social Science, Business and Law with 27% of respondents holding a qualification in that area (CSO, 2012). 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 and Whyte 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. (2003, p. 9)

Assessing the contribution of these post-1992 universities twenty years on, Peter Scott, Professor of Higher Education Studies at the Institute of Education in London remarks: "They have done the heavy lifting in terms of overall student expansion – and in widening participation for students from 'middle England', working class homes and ethnic minorities" (Scott, 2012).

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 number 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 and 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" (Keogh and Whyte, 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" (Keogh and Whyte, p. 49). In a study by Lyons and Little (2009), 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 students require a certain number of CAO points to access higher education in Ireland, they also have to meet entry requirements regarding English language competency. The lack of uniformity and consistency across the higher education sector in Ireland regarding the English language entry requirements has been highlighted in a number of studies (Warner, 2006; Coghlan et al, 2005; Ní Chonaill, 2014). Entry requirements for non-native speakers of English vary from college to college and indeed within colleges there are divergences. While international students may need to provide evidence of a score of 6.0 or more on IELTS [International English Language Testing System – the test of English most widely used in higher education] - which is equivalent to B2 on the Council of Europe Framework – to enter higher education, the same is not necessarily the case for students from migrant backgrounds who already have a qualification from the Irish education system such as the final state examination the Leaving Certificate or a further education qualification.[iii]

One of the common minimum entry requirements across the IOT sector is a pass in ordinary level Leaving Certificate English. When questioned on the level of English necessary to meet this, a language support teacher in a local secondary school estimated that "you could pass ordinary level English on an A2 level" (J. Thompson, personal communication, October 4, 2010), which is significantly lower than the IELTS requirement referred to above. In Ní Chonaill's study on English language support provided to migrants in the Irish higher education system, interviewees in a number of higher education institutions raised their concerns about the English language proficiency of some migrant students coming through "domestic routes" such as the Leaving Certificate (2014, p. 103). The challenges that NNS can face post entry into higher education were outlined above.

Keogh and 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 in Ireland. Access agreements allow students to gain entry to undergraduate courses on the basis of points attained through further education awards. Entry to further education courses can be secured with minimum Leaving Certificate results or on the basis of the Leaving Certificate Applied (CAO, 2013). A considerable proportion of students in Social Sciences in IOTs have come through the further education route; CAO figures for 2015 indicate that this was the case for 28% of the students offered places in Social Science courses in the institute in this study.

Methodology

The aim of this case study was to examine the views of migrant students and their lecturers on how English language proficiency impacts their academic achievement in the first year of their studies in an IOT. A group of first year students on a Social Studies programme was purposively chosen as the sample for this case study. The presence of NNS students and issues relating to their English language proficiency of NNS students and academic achievement had become apparent to lecturers. Given the small sample size (8 of the 77 students were NNS) and in order to give the students a voice, a semi-structured interview was used to access the views of NNS students taking part in the study regarding their experience of the impact of English language competency on their performance. Lecturers for this cohort of students were asked to complete a questionnaire at the end of Year 1 after the final examination board 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 NNS students. Eight out of ten lecturers returned completed questionnaires.

Purposive sampling (Arber, 2001, p. 63) was used to recruit the migrant students and these were individually interviewed in year two of their studies.[iv] Given the small size of the study, we do not claim that the findings are representative. Nonetheless, the study provides a snapshot of migrants' and their lecturers' views of the impact of English language proficiency on their academic achievement. The purpose and nature of the research was clearly explained to all the student interviewees in an initial email inviting them to take part before their involvement, as well as the fact that their participation was voluntary. This was reaffirmed at the interview stage when the steps taken to protect confidentiality and anonymity were described to participants and then informed consent was sought in writing. All of the interviews were recorded with the participants' permission, and were subsequently transcribed.

Systematic coding via content analysis was used on the interview transcripts and the open-ended answers from the questionnaires so that all the data was coded to bring together extracts that were relevant to particular themes. The three main thematic areas that were identified and which will be examined below include access, identification of NNS by lecturers and issues impacting performance.

Findings
Access
Of the eight NNS who participated in this small-scale study, one accessed the course following the completion of a Leaving Certificate, two entered as mature students and, the largest number, namely five, entered the course through the further education (FETAC) route. In addition to highlighting the various entry routes onto such a programme, this cohort is reflective of the considerable proportion of students studying Social Sciences in the IOTs who come through non-standard entry routes, 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 the IOT. 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.

Issues impacting performance
At the end of the first year of the programme upon which this case study was based, taking into consideration both summer and autumn examination results, four of the eight NNS (50%) and 53 of the 69 NS (76.8%) successfully completed first year of the programme(3). Amongst the four who passed, their performance and GPA varied. As highlighted earlier, migrants are diverse in terms of English language competency. Data collected from lecturers through questionnaires and from students through interviews provide insights into some of the issues from both perspectives.

Lecturer perspectives on NNS student language difficulties
In comparing NNS and NS, some lecturers commented that it was difficult to generalize as there was quite a range of abilities among the cohort. In general lecturers found that NNS students had "*a little*" rather than "*a lot*" more difficulty understanding material presented in

lectures, but that they tended to be similar to the average NS student in terms of asking relevant questions and participating in tutorials as well as in making presentations. Some lecturers noted that more time was spent in tutorials and on after class questions with NNS students than with NS students. Lecturers also found NNS students engaged in group work very well when groups were self-selected and a little less well in mixed or randomly selected groups. Most lecturers said that they were conscious of the fact that there were NNS students in their classes and did speak more slowly and pace their material in a more measured way because of this, some remarked that the NS students seemed to benefit from this, and that there was more openness around asking for clarification on the meaning of terms when there were NNS students in the class. Lecturers also commented that their presence in the class provided opportunities for providing examples of cultural differences.

It was in the area of written language production that lecturers highlighted a significant number of issues. While lack of general vocabulary and discipline specific vocabulary was acknowledged, the main areas for concern were spelling, the use of correct grammatical endings on words, and sentence and paragraph construction. There was concern that NNS students were not showing understanding of key concepts in their writing and providing appropriate examples to illustrate these. Lecturers also noted that NNS students had difficulty answering exam questions without reproducing verbatim lecture notes and readings. In assignments NNS students were seen to have more difficulties with referencing and in particular difficulties paraphrasing and commenting on sources. As a consequence issues of plagiarism arose more frequently for NNS than NS students.

NNS student perspectives on language difficulties
All of the students interviewed except one who had the highest scoring GPA said that their English language competency impacted their performance. The variation in language ability among the students was also evident in their responses. In advance of the interviews students were given a list of elements of academic English and asked to rate how problematic they were for them. These were drawn from current research, which sees academic English as having three levels: lexical (vocabulary), syntactic (forms of grammar) and discourse (rhetorical) (Cook Hirai, Borrego, Garza and Kloock, 2010, p. 5). The list included the lower order skills of spelling, general and specific vocabulary, grammar, sentence construction and use of an appropriate register of language. It then moved on to higher order issues of sequencing of ideas within and between paragraphs, being able to compare and contrast information, establishing cause and effect, being able to show understanding of key concepts and provide examples. Finally students were asked to consider if answering exam questions posed particular difficulties.

Some NNS students saw lack of vocabulary as a significant problem, others less so. Aspects of academic writing reported as being most problematic by NNS students included sequencing ideas, establishing a relationship between elements in a paragraph such as comparing and contrasting and establishing cause and effect, and moving logically from one paragraph to the next to build an argument. The issues were slightly different for written assignments and examinations. One student noted that "*CAs are relatively approachable, but not the exams*". Another student however remarked "*I can do a good CA but I don't know how to. I don't know how to start with it, what is needed in it so I just write and I don't get a good mark in CAs*". These higher order skills seem to prove very challenging for NNS students even when they have the information they need to write a good answer: "*Sometimes, I have so much information, I don't know how to put it all down in paper*". This appeared to be particularly difficult in written exams with one student commenting: "*to get to understand the question is*

one problem, to order chronologically all the information you get from the lecture notes and then the grammar itself". This is also picked up by another student who highlights the difficulties for NNS students trying to manage the time allocated for written examinations and trying to produce a well written answer "*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*".

It is evident from the reports above that 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 the experiences of some of her friends from non-English speaking countries with regard to academic writing: "*they struggle a lot, they find it very hard*". This is borne out in the observations that while students may perform well in oral presentations, in written assignments NNS students were seen to have more issues with paraphrasing, commenting on and referencing sources, and avoiding plagiarism.

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, Kim, Wurzburg and Kelly, 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 and 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*".

One NNS, referring to her four fellow students who did not progress past first year, spoke of the need for "*early intervention*" as when the results come out it is too late. The introduction of some type of intervention or language support raises a whole new range of issues. The IOT in question introduced English language support in the academic year 2013/2014. It is run as a "drop in" clinic and students do not get credits for attending the sessions. The challenges experienced over the two years that it has been on offer include low take-up on the part of students, which mirrors the experience of other higher education institutions in Ireland (Ní Chonaill, 2014). The timetabling of such support hours, in addition to issues regarding content delivered and the offering of credits for such classes all require consideration.

The needs of these students from migrant backgrounds may be different to the needs of Erasmus and other "international" students; this latter group may already have acquired a level of academic language in their native language which would include some of the higher order

skills alluded to previously such as ordering information, constructing paragraphs, linking ideas, comparing and contrasting information, establishing cause and effect. These academic writing skills can be transferred to English as proficiency grows. However students who have not had the opportunity to acquire academic language skills in their first language will struggle to acquire them in a second language. In the U.S. these students are described as Generation 1.5 (Roberge, Siegal and Harklau, 2009) as they are neither completely first nor second generation migrants, but fall between two cultures and two languages. As more of these students are coming through the system, the impact of English language competency on performance and the ways and means to address it are all issues set to have an increased impact on the IOT sector in Ireland.

Conclusion
While this case study involved a limited sample, a number of issues have emerged from the analysis. The HEA identified immigrants as a group whose needs merit consideration and yet they are not addressed in the most recent *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019*. 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. In fact the main inequality identified in this small scale study is one of outcomes rather than opportunities. In terms of performance, problems regarding written production and mastery of academic English were discussed, factors which impact on examination performance. 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. Early identification needs to precede the early intervention necessary, according to one interviewee.

Underachieving in higher education due to language issues can affect NNS students throughout the course of their studies and beyond. Hence equality of opportunity is not being realised in terms of certain students progressing to postgraduate studies or accessing the labour market. In the Irish context language skills are positively linked to earnings: an ESRI study found that migrants to Ireland 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). As was alluded to earlier, the HEA considers equality of access as including successful completion, in addition to access and retention. Hence the underachievement of migrants in the higher education system identified in this case study, which is linked to performance in the labour market, is an area that deserves further investigation in the Irish context.

The power of education to move people beyond social and economic exclusion has been well documented and, as Coakley argues, is "particularly true of immigrants" (2009, p. 4). Thus an equitable education system is of paramount significance for migrants, and indeed on a broader level for the well-being of the wider society. Third-level education is a "powerful and life-changing instrument in the process of social integration" (Linehan and Hogan, 2008, p. 3). Participants in Coghlan et al.'s study warned of resultant "dangers to social cohesion in Ireland in the future if a large body of migrants felt discriminated against and were unable properly to integrate" (2005, p. 25), and of the possible future creation of a "foreign national educational underclass". This is an issue that requires very serious consideration in the Irish context.

Notes

i.   The HEA is the statutory body that advises the Minister for Education and Skills regarding planning and policy for higher education and research in Ireland, in addition to allocating state funding to universities, IOTs and some designated higher education institutions (HEA, 2011).

ii.   The targeted under-represented groups for the current National Access plan are entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education, first time, mature student entrants, students with disabilities, part-time/flexible learners, further education award holders, Irish Travellers (HEA, 2015, p. 34).

iii.   In November 2012 Qualifications Quality Ireland (QQI) was established and as part of its remit has taken over the functions of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). In 2015 the 'QQI award' replaced the 'FETAC award' as the recognised qualification in the further education sector. www.qqi.ie

iv.   Only new entrants for 2012/13 who were considered in the summer and autumn examination boards were included in the study. A grade point average (GPA) of 2.0 is required to successfully progress from year one to year two, in addition to 60 credits.

References

Andrade, M. S. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities: Adjustment factors. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 5; 131, 131-154.

Arber, S. (2001) Designing Samples. In N. Gilbert (Ed.) *Researching Social Life*, London: Sage.

Baker, J., Lynch, C., Cantillon, S. and Walsh, J. (2004). *Equality from Theory to Action*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Central Statistics Office (CSO). (2011) *Population and Migration Estimates April 2011*. Retrieved 20 September 2013 from http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/population/2011/Population,and,Migration,Estimates,April,2011.pdf

CSO. (2012). *Profile 6 Migration and Diversity*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

CSO. (2013). *FETAC Qualifications*. Retrieved 15 September 2013 from http://www.cao.ie/index.php?page=scoringands=fetac

Coakley, L. (2009). *The Challenges and Obstacles facing Refugees, Persons with Leave to Remain and Persons granted Subsidiary Protection, as they seek to access post-second level education in Ireland.* Position Paper. Dublin: Refugee Information Service (RIS).

Coghlan, D., Fagan, H., Munck, R., O'Brien, A. and Warner, R. (2005). *International Students and Professionals in Ireland: An Analysis of Access to Higher Education and Recognition of Professional Qualifications*. Dublin: Integrating Ireland.

Collier Broderick. (2008). *English Language Training in Fingal*. Dublin: Fingal Development Board.

Cook Hirai, D., Borrego, I., Garza, E., and Kloock, C.T. (2010). *Academic Language/Literacy Strategies for Adolescents*. New York: Routledge.

Cummins, J. (1984). *Bilingualism and Special Education: Issues in Assessment and Pedagogy*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Department of Education and Skills. (2014). Higher Education Systems Performance Framework (SPF) 2014-2016. Retrieved from https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Higher-Education/HEA-Higher-Education-System-performance-Framework-2014-2016.pdf

Dunbar, P. (2008). *NASC Research Report: Evaluating the barriers in Employment and Education for Migrants in Cork*. Cork: NASC.

Higher Education Authority (HEA). (2008). *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education*. Dublin: HEA.

HEA. (2009). *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education*. Dublin: HEA.

HEA. (2010). External Audit of Equal Access Survey. Dublin: HEA. Retrieved from http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/hea_audit_of_equal_access.pdf.

HEA. (2013). *Higher Education Key Facts and Figures 2011/12*. Dublin: HEA.

HEA. (2015). *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019*. Dublin: HEA.

Keogh, A. and Whyte, J. (2003). *Getting on? The experiences and aspirations of immigrant students in second level schools linked to the Trinity Access Programmes*. The Children's Research Centre: Trinity College Dublin.

Linehan, M. and Hogan, E. (2008). *Migrants and Higher Education in Ireland*. Cork: EINE.

Liston, M., Frawley, D. and Patterson, V. (2016). *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education 2012/13 to 2013/14*. Dublin: HEA.

Lyons, Z. and Little, D. (2009). *English Language Support in Irish Post-Primary Schools: Policy, Challenges and Deficits*. Dublin: Trinity College Dublin.

Mc Gorman, E. and Sugrue, C. (2007). *Intercultural Education: Primary Challenges in Dublin 15*. Dublin: Social Inclusion Unit DES.

Mooney, O., Patterson, V., O'Connor, M. and Chantler, A. (2010). *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education*. Dublin: HEA.

Ní Chonaill, B. (2014). The linguistic challenges of immigration: the higher education sector's response. In D. Little, C. Leung, and P.V. Avernaet, (Eds.) *Managing Diversity in Education Languages, Policies, Pedagogies*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

O'Connell, P.J. and McGinnity, F. (2008). *Immigrants at Work. Ethnicity and Nationality in the Irish Labour Market*. Dublin: Equality Authority and ESRI.

Patterson, V. and Prendeville, N. (2014). *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education Institutions, 2010/11-2011/12*. Dublin: HEA.

Rienties, B., Beausaert, S., Grohnert, T., Niemantsverdriet, S. and Kommers, P. (2011). Understanding academic performance of international students: the role of ethnicity, academic and social integration. *High Educ* 63: 685-700.

Roberge, M., Siegal, M. and Harklau, L. (Eds.) (2009). *Generation 1.5 in College Composition: Teaching Academic Writing to U.S.-educated Learners of ESL*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Ryan, C. (2012). *Socio-Economic Profile of XXX*. Dublin: BAP.

Scott, P. (2012, Sept 3rd). It's 20 years since polytechincs became universities – and there's no going back. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/sep/03/polytechnics-became-universities-1992-differentiation

Smyth, E., Darmody, M., McGinnity, F. and Byrne, D. (2009). *Adapting to Diversity: Irish Schools and Newcomer Students*. Research Series no.8, June. Dublin: ESRI.

Taguma, M., Kim, M., Wurzburg, G. and Kelly, F. (2009). *OECD Reviews of Migrant Education: Ireland.* Paris: OECD.

Walshe, J. and Donnelly, K. (2006, Dec 4th). Revealed: The Great Schools' Class Divide. *Irish Independent*. Retrieved from http://www.independent.ie/national-news/revealed-the-great-schools-class-divide-62866.html

Warner, R. (2006). *Barriers to Access to Further and Higher Education for non-EU Nationals Resident in Ireland*. Dublin: Pobal.