CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Widening participation in Irish higher education: Report 2020
Authors	Powell, Fred;Scanlon, Margaret;Jenkinson, Hilary
Publication date	2020
Original Citation	Powell, F., Scanlon, M. and Jenkinson, H. (2020) Widening Participation in Irish Higher Education: Report 2020. Cork: University College Cork. isbn: 978-1-5272-5692-7
Type of publication	Report
Download date	2026-11-06 20:22:55
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/13856



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh



WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

REPORT **2020**

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

RESEARCH TEAM

Professor Fred Powell (PI), Dr Margaret Scanlon, Pat Leahy, Hilary Jenkinson,
School of Applied Social Studies and the Institute for Social Science in the 21st Century (ISS21),
and Olive Byrne, UCC Plus, University College Cork.

Cork: University College Cork
ISBN: 978-1-5272-5692-7

2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all of the young people (in schools and UCC), teachers, parents and representatives from youth, community and Traveller organisations who participated in this research.

This research project has been funded by the Irish Research Council and the Department of Education and Skills.

TABLE OF **CONTENTS**

Page 4 **CHAPTER 1:** Introduction

Page 7 **CHAPTER 2:** Methodology

Page 10 **CHAPTER 3:** Previous Research

Page 15 **CHAPTER 4:** Non-traditional Students' Experiences of University

Page 22 **CHAPTER 5:** Young People's Orientations towards Higher Education: aspirations, motivations and enablers

Page 28 **CHAPTER 6:** Barriers to Access and Participation

Page 36 **CHAPTER 7:** Parental Attitudes to Further and Higher Education

Page 43 **CHAPTER 8:** Educational Disadvantage in the Traveller Community

Page 47 **CHAPTER 9:** Conclusion

Page 50 **REFERENCES**

Page 55 **APPENDIX** Participants Profile: socio-demographic profile and parents' education

CHAPTER 1: **INTRODUCTION**

> *Ireland is among the leading countries [in Europe] in providing alternative entry routes and in enrolments by students whose parents did not participate in higher education. By contrast we have relatively low levels of participation in higher education by students from groups experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.* Higher Education Authority, 2015: 15

The above comment, made by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in its National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019, captures the essential paradox in Irish higher education – dynamic expansion without achieving equality of access (Clancy, 1995 and 2015). Participation rates in Irish higher education rose from 20% of the relevant age cohort in 1980 to 44% in 1998 and to 52% in 2011 (HEA, 2015: 14). New and innovative routes of access to higher education (HE) have been developed over the years and supports have been established to increase participation for students from low-income backgrounds, including the introduction of the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) programme. However, while participation in HE from lower socio-economic groups has increased over the last few decades, their participation rates remain low relative to their counterparts from other groups. Figures published by the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2015) show that participation of those from the semi-skilled and unskilled socio-economic groups is at 26%, while there is practically full participation by those from the higher professional socio-economic group. There are also marked differences between postal districts: over 99% of 18–20 year olds in one postal district in Dublin go on to HE, while in another part of the capital the rate is only 15% (HEA, 2015: 14). Entry into professional faculties, such as law, medicine, pharmacy and dentistry, is derived principally from upper socio-economic groups, with little change to entry patterns for those coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Clancy, 2001; HEA, 2015; Lynch, 2006).

The unequal patterns of access to higher education in Ireland are replicated internationally (see for example, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2008; Chesters and Watson, 2013; Institute for Research on Higher Education, 2016; Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2013). A significant body of research in the UK, the US and Australia has examined the factors that contribute to lower levels of participation. The financial barriers to higher education include concerns about the cost of attending college and getting into debt, as well as the loss of potential income while in college (Callender, 2003; Connor and Dewson, 2001; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; McCoy and Byrne, 2011). In addition, young people from middle-class families are able to avail of educational resources that enable them to maintain their relative advantage when competing for college places (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Reay, 2005). Other factors contributing to the under-representation of students from lower socio-economic groups include: lower levels of family history of HE participation; perceptions of universities as elitist; lower levels of academic attainment at school level; and a lack of information and guidance on HE and on financial supports (Ball et al., 2002a; Connor and Dewson, 2001; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003). The research also points to disparities in confidence and expectations amongst young people from different socio-economic backgrounds (Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Crozier et al., 2008).

There is a good deal of consistency across research findings, both within and between different national contexts, but there are also ongoing debates, particularly with regards to working-class aspiration and constructions of HE. A significant body of research suggests that young people and families from disadvantaged backgrounds regard HE as remote from their own experience (see Hutchings and Archer, 2001; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998). However, other studies call into question the idea that young people from disadvantaged communities are significantly deterred by perceptions of universities as elitist and 'alien' (Baker et al., 2014; Bradley and Miller, 2010; James, 2002; Kettley and Whitehead, 2012), an issue we return to in chapter 3.

In Ireland, several quantitative and mixed-methods studies have documented the under-representation of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in HE (e.g. Clancy, 2001; McCoy and Byrne, 2011; McCoy et al., 2010; O'Connell et al., 2006), including research on the effects of geographic accessibility on participation levels by different social classes (Cullinan et al., 2013). In addition, a small number of qualitative studies have explored different aspects of access to HE, including a comparative analysis of the availability of information and guidance on HE in working- and middle-class schools (Smyth and Banks, 2012); and research on the experience of under-represented students in HE (Finnegan and Merrill, 2017; Keane, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). Of particular note, is Lynch and O'Riordan's (1998) comprehensive study of the potential barriers to HE in the 1990s, which provides a useful basis for comparison. The current research builds on these earlier qualitative studies and complements the large-scale statistical studies undertaken in Ireland and internationally.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The project explored continuing inequalities in access to higher education based on socio-economic status. The main objectives of the research were to:

- Better understand patterns of higher education participation amongst young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- Investigate orientations towards higher education within communities experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and low participation rates.
- Identify factors, including barriers and facilitators, which impact on young people's decision-making in relation to participation in higher education.
- Explore the experiences of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who had progressed to higher education.

The research was located in three disadvantaged communities, both urban and rural, and included: a survey of senior-cycle students (5th and 6th year) in six schools; interviews with 13 teachers/head teachers; focus groups with 70 school students; interviews and focus groups with 25 parents; and interviews with six representatives from youth and community organisations. In addition, five interviews were carried out with representatives from a Traveller Health and Community project; a Third Level Traveller Access Programme; and a youth-work organisation that works with Travellers who return to education.

We carried out interviews with 16 university students who entered college through the Higher Education Access Route. This initiative promotes access to higher education for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Details on the methodology are provided in chapter 2.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

From a widening participation perspective, there were some very positive findings in our research, particularly in relation to young people's aspirations. The survey and focus groups suggest that the majority of young people were interested in going on to higher education and had positive views of what college would entail. The data also indicates that parents value education, believe that it has become more important over time and want their children to progress either to further or higher education. Nonetheless it was clear that there are still significant barriers to HE for young people from disadvantaged communities. In line with previous research (e.g. Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; McCoy and Byrne, 2011), we found that economic factors continue to have an important influence and, arguably, have become more significant over the last eight years in the wake of the 'Great Recession'. While some economic barriers occur at the point of entry (e.g. registration fees, accommodation) others reflect deep-seated structural problems, notably poverty and unequal access to educational resources. Teachers and community workers, particularly in the city schools, noted that there were different levels of disadvantage within disadvantaged communities: some young people lived in conditions of extreme poverty and their families faced an uncertain future, for example, due to financial debt, the threat of eviction and of becoming homeless. In these circumstances, education is pushed down the list of priorities, with knock-on effects on school attendance and academic attainment and aspirations.

Another set of potential barriers related to young people's orientations towards HE. While many of these young people aspired to go to college, this was countered by a lack of confidence in relation to certain aspects of college life, both social and academic. Teachers, community workers and a few parents located this lack of confidence in a broader context, including traditionally low levels of family/community participation in HE. Coming from areas that have been designated (and in some cases stigmatised) as 'disadvantaged' also appears to impact on young people's levels of confidence, both in the employment market and in educational choices. Furthermore, they may know few (if any) other young people from their communities who are going to college. The young people in our study displayed none of the assuredness about their future or sense of 'university entitlement' often associated with higher socio-economic groups (see Crozier et al., 2008). Like Ball et al. (2002b: 57) we found that 'doubts, ambivalences and very deliberate decision-making' were features of young people's thinking about HE.

The data relating to parental orientations to higher education also provided a somewhat mixed picture. All groups of participants in the research reported that parents in these communities valued education and wanted their children to do well. Teachers stressed the potential role of parents in enabling their children to go on to HE: for example, one principal noted that in cases where young people had gone to college, it was often because they had been encouraged to do so by their parents and, in particular, by 'strong mothers'. Nonetheless, teachers also reported that many working-class parents were not familiar with the post-secondary education system, which was particularly evident in choosing college courses and making applications. Like Kettley and Whitehead (2012: 507) we found that the issue was 'not parental ambivalence or discouragement…but gaps in parents' practical advice'. Parents themselves acknowledged their lack of familiarity with the HE system and their reliance on schools and colleges to provide information and advice.

In line with previous studies (see Baker et al., 2014), our research points to the importance of supporting parents and teachers in providing guidance to students as they progress through the education system. In DEIS schools, with their high numbers of young people from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds, the role of the career guidance counsellor is particularly important in providing information on HE and supporting college applications (HEA, 2015: 17–18). However, funding cuts to education, which were part of wider austerity measures during the recession, resulted in reduced hours for career guidance from 2012 onwards (see DES, 2017; Guidance Counsellors, 2016).

The research also looked at the experiences of 16 students who had entered university through the Higher Education Access Route. In line with previous studies (Keane, 2009; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003) we found that students from working-class backgrounds face a number of challenges when they first enter university. Anxiety about not knowing anyone and having to make new friends featured prominently in students' accounts of their transition to higher education. Moreover, most said that they had little idea of what to expect either socially or academically and initially felt disoriented by the size of the campus and number of students. Our findings indicate the importance of providing targeted supports to non-traditional students when they enter college. When asked 'what helped', students spoke mainly of the orientation events and one-to-one supports provided through the HEAR programme.

Finally, the research findings highlight not only the challenges faced by non-traditional students, but also the positive aspects of college life, which often centered on peer relationships and the 'atmosphere' of the university. It was notable that while none of these working-class students mentioned the social dimension of college life as a motive for going on to HE, it featured prominently in discussions on what they enjoyed about university and how they had benefitted from the experience. Overall the research points to a diversity of experience, encompassing both challenges and rewards for working-class students in higher education.

CHAPTER 2: **METHODOLOGY**

The data presented in this report derives from a two-year project that explored the under-representation of young people from lower socio-economic groups in higher education. The project was based primarily on qualitative research that incorporated the views of young people, parents, teachers, career guidance counsellors and youth and community groups. In this way we set out to examine the complex issue of educational disadvantage from three research sites: home, school and community.

There is a strong geographic and community basis to under-representation in higher education, with some areas far below the national participation rate (Higher Education Authority, 2014). In recognition of this, we took a case-study approach to explore access to HE in three areas of social disadvantage: two urban (Dublin and Cork) and one rural (Kerry). These areas were selected on the basis of existing data sources on: (a) socio-economic disadvantage (e.g. Pobal HP Deprivation Index); and (b) areas with low-participation rates in HE (HEA, 2014). Within each case-study location, we invited two DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools to participate in the research, providing a total of six schools. [1]

RESEARCH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Although our research was primarily qualitative, an initial survey of 5th and 6th year students in the six schools was conducted in order to provide an overview of students' plans for the future and orientations towards higher education. The survey also provided a means of collecting demographic data (see Appendix) and recruiting volunteers for focus groups. The survey was administered online in five schools and in hard copy in the sixth school, which did not have sufficient computers to accommodate an online survey. At the request of this school, the questionnaire was only administered to 6th year students due to the difficulties in accommodating a paper survey of both year groups. In total, 303 questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of just under 70%: the remaining students were either absent on the days when the questionnaire was administered or chose not to participate. It was made clear to students in advance that taking part in the survey was entirely optional. Of the 272 participants who provided information on gender, 47% were male and 53% female. The vast majority (79%) of students described themselves as 'white Irish' (see Appendix, Table 2 for further details).

CREATIVE FOCUS GROUPS

At the end of the questionnaire, students were given brief details on the planned focus groups and asked if they would like to participate. Seventy senior-cycle students subsequently participated in seven focus groups across the six schools. The design and conduct of this element of the research was informed by 'creative focus group' approaches (Stuart et al., 2015) that seek to optimise levels of participant engagement, for example through small group work or other activities. In each focus group participants were divided into two or three smaller groups and asked to discuss a number of themes, including: their perceptions of school and higher education; reasons for wanting (or not wanting) to go on to HE; and the factors that would facilitate or inhibit progression. They recorded their ideas on stick-pad notes, which were then displayed on flipcharts. This was followed by an all-group discussion on the results, facilitated by two researchers, both of whom are experienced in youth work and participatory methods. With the permission of students, the focus groups were recorded and subsequently transcribed and analysed, in conjunction with the written responses.

EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

As well as conducting research with school students, we undertook two focus groups with 15 early school leavers who were enrolled in a youth project that provides alternative education for those not in mainstream provision. The first focus group was comprised principally of young people who were born in Ireland, while the second was made up of young migrants from several countries including Poland, Syria, Togo, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

[1] *Schools that are part of the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme are located in disadvantaged areas and generally have a significantly lower rate of student progression to higher education. Analysis by the Department of Education and Skills indicates that 24% of students completing the second year of senior cycle in DEIS schools progress on to higher education, compared to 50% for all schools (HEA, 2015: 37).*

RESEARCH WITH TEACHERS, PARENTS AND YOUTH AND COMMUNITY WORKERS

In-depth interviews were held with 13 members of staff in the six schools, including principals, career guidance counsellors and (in one case) the school completion programme coordinator. In addition, interviews were held with six representatives from youth and community organisations in the three case-study areas in order to present local perspectives on the issues. Several of these organisations had an educational remit, for example, providing opportunities for young people returning to education or supporting those who had progressed to third-level education. In addition, an in-depth interview was held with a representative from the national organisation Empowering People in Care (EPIC) to explore the barriers to participation in HE for young people in care/leaving care.

Interviews were held with 25 parents, who were accessed through the schools. Each school sent home flyers (produced by the research team) notifying parents of the research and inviting them to participate. In total 27 parents volunteered, though 2 later withdrew. Parents were given the choice of where to meet, resulting in a number of interview settings, including homes, schools and community venues (e.g. public-library meeting rooms). All interviews were, with the written permission of participants, recorded and transcribed. There was a notable gender imbalance in our final sample – 24 mothers and 1 father – although previous research suggests that this is not unusual (see for example Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003). Parental levels of education are one of the most effective means for identifying 'less advantaged students', arguably more so than occupation (see James, 2002: 12–13), therefore parents were asked if they themselves had had any direct experience of higher education. None of the parents in our sample had progressed from school to HE (though two went to college as mature students) and the majority had left school by the age of 16 to start work. In the course of the interviews they spoke of how their own early lives had shaped their attitudes to their children's education.

One of our concerns when asking for volunteers for the parents' interviews was that we might attract only those parents who expected their children to progress to higher education. However, this proved not to be the case, as we shall see in chapter 7, the sample reflected different parental expectations and levels of engagement with their children's education and future plans.

RESEARCH WITH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

We undertook interviews (either individual or paired) and one focus group with a total of 16 undergraduate students who had entered university through the Higher Education Access Route. In order to qualify for HEAR, family income must be below a certain level and applicants must also meet several additional criteria, for example living and attending school in an area that has been designated as disadvantaged. Our objective in this initial stage of the research was to explore non-traditional students' perceptions of access to HE and their experience of college.

Participants were recruited through the university's Access Office, which forwarded an email to students who had entered college through HEAR. Sixteen students (six male and ten female) were recruited from a range of disciplines, including science, nursing and health, law, the humanities and social science. Four out of the 16 students were from ethnic-minority backgrounds. Although the research did not set out to explore the links between ethnicity and participation in HE, this issue was raised briefly by one participant, in relation to motivation, and was a significant theme in another interview with a student from the Traveller community. The research with students provided valuable insights into the experiences of less-privileged university students and also informed the subsequent fieldwork in schools.

EXPLORATORY RESEARCH ON TRAVELLER ACCESS TO HE

Exploratory research was carried out in relation to access to higher education for young people from the Traveller community. The Higher Education Authority has identified Travellers as being severely disadvantaged in this regard, with the rate of participation in higher education being a 'tiny minority' (HEA, 2008: 29). The issue of Traveller access to higher education was explored through:

- An initial meeting with a representative from Pavee Point, a national NGO that works to promote Traveller and Roma human rights, that played a valuable role in sensitising the research team to Traveller perspectives on the educational system and which informed the subsequent research. Members of the research team also attended 'Irish Travellers and Higher Education: Supporting Progression', a seminar that brought together key agencies involved in Traveller education, as well as reporting on the experiences of young Travellers in HE.
- Interviews with three representatives from a Traveller Health and Community project and from a Third Level Traveller Access Programme.
- Interviews with members of staff at a youth work organisation that works with young people (including Travellers) who have returned to education.
- An in-depth interview with a student from the Traveller community who entered university through the HEAR scheme. This provided an opportunity to compare her experiences of HE with those of other students.

ANALYSIS

Interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically. To preserve anonymity, all individuals were assigned pseudonyms and any other identifying information is omitted from the report. Data from the online survey with school students was imported into SPSS for analysis.

CHAPTER 3: **PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

INTRODUCTION

Rates of participation in higher education from lower socio-economic groups has increased over the last few decades, but still remain low relative to their counterparts from other groups. Figures published in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019 show that participation of those from the semi-skilled and unskilled socio-economic groups is at 26%, while there is practically full participation by those from the higher professional socio-economic group (HEA, 2015). These figures point to a sharp social division in access to higher education based on class and community. International research suggests that the unequal patterns of access to higher education in Ireland are replicated in other countries, including Great Britain, Canada, the USA and Australia. In the first part of this chapter we will outline previous research on the factors that impact on levels of participation in higher education by young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This is followed by an overview of the research on the challenges that non-traditional students may face in HE and their experience of college life.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE RATES OF PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Economic/Financial Barriers to HE

Previous studies indicate that the financial barriers to HE include not only the cost of attending college, but also the loss of potential earnings while in college (Callender, 2003; Connor and Dewson, 2001; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998). In the Irish context, McCoy et al. (2010: 166) found that the 'pull of the labour market' was an important factor in non-participation in third-level education, particularly for young men:

> The labour market and apprenticeship route emerged as strong attractions for these young people. While some continued in part-time jobs they had secured while in school, others spoke of the booming construction sector...In any case, many became used to earning, having money in their pocket and the sense of independence that accompanied it. This represented an especially powerful incentive to forego college for some.

Other research suggests that young people from more affluent families are able to access a range of learning resources and services during primary and secondary school (see Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003), that enable them to maintain their relative advantage when competing for college places (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Reay, 2005). Private tuition is now a significant part of exam preparation in Ireland, with nearly half of Leaving Certificate students taking grinds (Smyth, 2009). However, this system may further disadvantages students from poorer families for whom private tuition is not an option.

Perceptions of Higher Education

A significant body of research suggests that young people and families from disadvantaged backgrounds regard higher education as remote and alien from their own experience, which in turn affects aspiration. Archer et al. (2007: 232), for example, describe:

> ...the continued dominance of middle-class institutional habitus within higher education, against which working-class students imagine that they do not 'fit'. Higher education does not appear to offer working-class young people the space to 'feel myself'... and/or to generate value through 'known' mechanisms. Rather, it is seen as an alien space in which they will stand out and 'not belong' in a myriad of ways.

Lynch and O'Riordan (1998: 461), raise a similar point in their research:

> For second-level students, one of the major social and cultural barriers identified was the sense of education, and particularly higher education, as being remote and alien from the lives of their families. Second-level students noted repeatedly that they knew very little about college life. Not knowing what to expect created fears and anxieties which exacerbated practical difficulties… They believed that college was a very different and unfamiliar place, and they feared isolation.

However, other research calls into question the idea that young people from disadvantaged communities are significantly deterred by perceptions of universities as elitist and 'alien' (Baker et al., 2014; Bradley and Miller, 2010; James, 2002; Kettley and Whitehead, 2012). One large-scale Australian survey (James, 2002) found that most young people (including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds) had generally positive attitudes towards university, even those who were not planning to go there themselves. In addition, a significant proportion of those from poorer backgrounds indicated that, if there were no constraints, they would prefer to go to university. More recent UK-based research (Baker et al., 2014: 7) found that most young people held high aspirations for gaining further academic qualifications, even though these aspirations 'are running ahead of the chances of them being achieved given current continuation rates into higher education'.

Attitudes to Education in the Home

Previous research has explored parents' orientations to further and higher education and how the nature of parental support can vary significantly depending on socio-economic background (e.g. Ball et al., 2002; Irwin and Elley, 2011, 2012). In their research on ethnicity, social class and participation in higher education, Ball et al. (2002a: 342) found that college-educated parents are able to mobilise various forms of support and information and are directly involved in choice-making: for instance, in making visits to universities and commenting on university application forms. Similarly, Crozier et al. (2008) argue that parental knowledge and social networks contribute to a sense of 'university entitlement' amongst middle-class young people, which is largely absent in the case of their working-class counterparts (see also Evans, 2009: 340 and 352). A number of studies indicate that while working-class parents value higher education and often have high expectations for their children, their efforts to support them are hampered by unfamiliarity with college requirements, concerns about college affordability and limited awareness of financial-aid opportunities (see Kirk *et al.*, 2011). As Ball *et al.* (2002a: 337) point out:

> The student can expect little financial support from [his/her parents] in choice-making or in funding higher education itself, although there may well be emotional support and high levels of encouragement and expectation within the family for the achievement of credentials. Mothers sometimes figure large in giving practical support and encouragement. But expectations are 'generic' and sometimes unrealistic and weakly linked to 'real' imagined futures…Higher education and 'getting a degree' are general categories; neither family nor student have much sense of the different kinds and statuses of higher education on offer or what higher education study will be like.

Bourdieu's theory of habitus and social and cultural capital has been particularly important in informing the development of research on social class and access to higher education, though some commentators have cautioned against using these concepts in an overly deterministic way, 'as static concepts for dichotomous class comparisons' (Kettley and Whitehead, 2012: 503). Irwin and Elley (2011: 480) argue that within recent literature there has been a tendency towards 'overstating the internal homogeneity of middle-class and working-class experience'. Studies in the US and the UK have highlighted the fact that parental orientations to education can vary within, as well as across, classes and can change over time, in response to a number of factors (see Goldenberg, 2001; Irwin and Elley, 2011 and 2012; Mistry et al., 2009).

Academic Attainment at School Level

Previous research suggests that social class is still 'a powerful predictor of educational attainment' and that 'a smaller proportion of young people from lower socio-economic groups achieve the minimum-entry qualifications for HE' (Hutchings and Archer, 2001: 70; see also Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Wilks and Wilson, 2012: 81). This suggests that the key processes impacting on participation in HE occur much earlier in the educational process. According to Forsyth and Furlong (2003: 223) more needs to be done to support under-represented groups during their school years:

> At the most basic level, access to higher education was found to be governed by pre-existing school attainment rather than any systematic biases in entrance procedures. There is clearly a need for policy to become more focused on improving the academic performance of disadvantaged young people during their school years, rather than on university admission procedures.

Similarly, Adnett (2006: 309) notes that: 'increasing higher education participation among non-traditional student groups primarily requires interventions into pre-primary, primary and secondary schooling targeted at raising aspirations and attainments in groups with a low probability of attaining higher-education entry requirements'.

NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

A number of international studies have explored class-based variations in college choice and the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education, including the challenges they face, their sense of 'fitting-in' and the academic transition to HE. Some of the main themes to emerge from this body of research are outlined below.

Choice of Higher Education Institution and Course

In debates on widening participation, it is important not only to look at whether people from a working-class background go on to HE (access), but also which institutions they attend, which courses they take and which career paths they follow (outcomes). Research in Ireland indicates that students entering professional faculties, such as law, medicine and dentistry, are disproportionately represented by those coming from middle- and upper middle-class backgrounds with little change to entry patterns for those coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Clancy, 2001; HEA, 2015; Lynch, 2006). In the UK, working-class and other non-traditional students are more likely to attend post-1992 universities (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Read et al., 2003) and make up only a small proportion of the student body at 'elite' universities (Reay et al., 2009). Similar patterns of stratification have been noted in America, leading to concerns in both the UK and the US that widening participation in HE is doing little to address class inequalities (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003: 612; Reay et al., 2010).

Challenges Facing Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education

Previous research suggests that non-traditional students' experience of HE can be one of struggle, due to financial issues, lack of confidence in their ability and institutional factors (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). Financial issues are particularly pertinent to working-class participation, as students may have to work part-time, which has implications for the amount of time they can study (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998: 457). Moreover, students who, for financial reasons, have to live at home and work during term time may have a very different experience of university life, with fewer opportunities to participate in non-academic activities and socialise with fellow students (Cooke et al., 2004; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Yorke and Thomas, 2003). Lynch and O'Riordan's research indicates that working-class students have to rely heavily on college facilities, such as libraries, computers, photocopying and crèches. If college facilities were overcrowded, students suffered as they could not opt to buy the services outside of college. In some instances, students believed that they could not participate in college on equal terms with other students because of poor college facilities. In addition, first-generation students tend not to be as well informed or as prepared as those whose family members did attend college, and this lack of familiarity can be challenging (Scutter et al., 2011).

'Fitting in' in Higher Education

The issues of 'fitting in' and 'identity' are recurring themes in the literature on participation in higher education (Ramburuth and Hartel, 2010). When students have to manage competing demands of work and study, and when they have to attend local institutions and live with their families (as is often the case for poorer students) they 'only partially absorb a sense of themselves as students, and their learner identities remain relatively fragile and unconfident' (Reay et al., 2010: 107). Lynch and O'Riordan's (1998: 462) research with 40 working-class students in Ireland found that over a

third 'felt like outsiders because of their class origins'. Some students reported that they had difficulty making new friends and often felt lonely and isolated in college. The fact that middle-class students had a bigger network of friends from their school and neighbourhood than working-class students further highlighted working-class students' relative social and cultural separateness from middle-class institutions. More recent Irish research (Keane, 2009: 94) raises similar issues:

> Whilst making friends may well be a concern for most, if not all, new students, it is likely that it is more so for students from under-represented groups, because many, particularly those from lower socio-economic groups and mature students, are not accompanied by friends from school and/or wider social circles, whereas 'traditional' school-leaver entrants usually are. In the same way, while it could be argued that losing touch with non-HE participant friends may not be that exceptional, students from under-represented groups have often left many, if not most, of their contemporaries behind, and therefore are more likely to feel isolated on campus.

The importance of friendships as a source of support has been emphasised in a number of studies, particularly in relation to student retention. According to Wilcox et al. (2005: 707), 'making compatible friends is essential to retention…friends provide direct emotional support, equivalent to family relationships, as well as buffering support in stressful situations'. Those who start university knowing no one, or who have difficulties fitting in, may lack this important form of support (Scutter et al., 2011) and this can affect decisions on whether to remain at university (Wilcox et al., 2005). Research in the UK also suggests that concerns about belonging may influence university choice. For example, some non-traditional students choose to go to 'new' universities because they assume they are more likely to find 'people like us' amongst the student body (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003: 601; Read et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2010), particularly when compared with the intake at elite universities. Yet even in the new universities the sense of being 'other' may remain because of unfamiliar academic practices and cultures (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003: 606; Read et al., 2003: 269–72).

Other research points to the complex nature of fitting-in and how students may feel a sense of belonging in certain respects, but not others. One study with working-class students in an elite university in the UK found that they initially struggled to come to terms with 'the shock of the elite' and the 'rarefied atmosphere' within this institution, where the vast majority of students are middle class (Reay et al., 2009: 1111). However, while these working-class students initially found it difficult to fit in socially, they felt at home as 'learners', more so than they had in their own communities: 'In Southern [university] there were the comforts of academic acceptance and compliance in contrast to their secondary schools where a majority of the working-class students had been mocked for working hard,' (Reay et al., 2009: 1115). The authors go on to argue that 'individuals are able to move in and out of different identity positions', a point also raised by Kaufman (2003) in his research with first-generation college students in the US.

Academic Transition from School to College

Previous research suggests that non-traditional students may experience difficulties in the transition to the academic culture of independent learning and reduced support from teaching staff, relative to school. Read et al. (2003: 270) argue that for many students 'the culture of academia can lead them to feel alienated or isolated':

> In our study, a significant number of students expressed feelings of confusion and bewilderment at some 'accepted' university practices, and often contrasted them with previous known experiences of learning at school or at further education college. Some felt disoriented by the huge size of the university and the physical distance they had to travel between different lecture or seminar rooms, often held in a number of different buildings…. Moreover, for many respondents, their encounter with the prevalent higher education discourse of students as 'independent learners' came as a considerable shock…Many were surprised at the relative lack of supervision by lecturers compared to school or college.

On the other hand, as we have seen above, Reay et al. (2009) found that some working-class students experience a greater sense of belonging as learners in university, than they did in their own schools and communities. A complex picture emerges whereby academia can be both inclusive in some respects and alienating in others.

Rewards of Participating in HE

Much of the research discussed above has focused on the difficulties faced by non-traditional students in higher education, however some studies also highlight the potential rewards. Cooke et al. (2004), found that while students from disadvantaged backgrounds faced certain challenges – for example they were more likely to work during term time – they also rated their time at university as highly as other students, 'indicating equally high satisfaction'. There were no class differences in ratings of teaching quality and students from disadvantaged backgrounds rated

certain aspects of their experience (e.g. obtaining transferable skills) more positively than other students (Cooke et al., 2004: 416–17). Moreover, while some studies indicate that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to socialise during term time, Cooke et al.'s longitudinal research found that the level of socialisation varies within, as well as across, social classes and changes over time. Finnegan and Merril's (2017) comparative study of the experiences of working-class students in British and Irish higher-education institutions, also provides a mixed picture: while acknowledging the 'sense of social distance from the dominant culture in universities', these students were nonetheless 'enormously positive about going to university'. Arguably these positive experiences of university life need to be explored further (along with the challenges), particularly as a means of replicating good practice and developing appropriate supports for working-class and other non-traditional students.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have considered the barriers to higher education identified in both Irish and international literature. While there is a good deal of consistency across research findings, both within and between different national contexts, there are also ongoing debates, particularly with regards to working-class aspiration and constructions of higher education. The research on non-traditional students' experience of higher education also provides a somewhat mixed picture. A significant body of research points to the difficulties and struggles that students from poorer backgrounds face when they enter higher education, notably in relation to fitting in and adjusting to the academic culture. However other studies suggest that, in certain respects, these young people may fit in better in college than they did in their own schools and communities. In the following chapter we report the findings of our research with undergraduate students who entered university through the Higher Education Access Route, focusing in particular on the issues raised above.

CHAPTER 4: **NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF UNIVERSITY**

INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on in-depth interviews and a focus group with 16 undergraduate students who entered university through the Higher Education Access Route. As noted earlier, HEAR is a widening-participation scheme that offers places on reduced points and extra college support to school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (HEAR, 2017). Our research with students sought to explore their pathways into higher education and their experience of college life, particularly in the first year. Whilst different aspects of the transition to college and the first-year experience were explored in the research, social and relational issues emerged as a dominant theme and will be the main focus of this chapter. Students' perceptions of the academic transition from school to college will also be considered.

The social and relational aspect of students' experience of higher education has attracted increasing attention in the international literature, notably in debates around retention (Lehmann, 2007; Maunder, 2017; Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 1993; Wilcox et al., 2005; Yorke and Thomas, 2003). According to Wilcox et al. (2005: 707) 'in order to understand higher education retention, equal emphasis needs to be placed on successful integration into the social world of the university as into the academic world'. Research indicates that developing social relationships with peers is a key part of the transition to higher education and students who make compatible friends are better adjusted to university life (Maunder, 2017: 9). The issues of social integration and retention have particular significance for students from under-represented groups because many are not accompanied by friends from school or wider social circles (Keane, 2009). In addition, concerns about fitting in in a largely middle-class environment may impact upon their choice of college and experience of college life (Aries and Seider, 2005; Finnegan and Merrill, 2017: 318; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003: 601; Lehmann, 2007; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998; Read et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2010; Voigt, 2007). For instance, Lehmann's (2007: 96) research with first-generation students in a Canadian university found that they experienced 'class-cultural discontinuities, such as not fitting in, not "feeling the university" and not being able to relate to other students'.

THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

Students described a mix of emotions in relation to their transition to university, including excitement and a sense of achievement at having 'made it' to college. However, anxiety about the social dimension of university life was also a recurring theme in students' accounts of the period leading up to enrolment and their early weeks at university. The young people in our study did not know anyone in college when they first started and were worried about the prospect of having to form new friendships. One participant, now a second-year student, recalled her anxiety about going to the orientation day on her own and her relief at meeting someone she recognised from her neighbourhood. Her determination not to let him out of her sight during the day was recounted with a touch of humour, but is nonetheless indicative of the social anxiety that she felt before starting college:

> He was on my course for the orientation day and I was like 'Stay with me, if you move out of my sight you're dead! Just stay with me!'

Another student described his unsuccessful attempts to persuade his friends to apply to university so he would not be on his own:

> I didn't know anyone, like all my friends, none of them came here. I tried to get some of them to come to [university] just so I wouldn't be the only one there. There was a friend who was interested in it, but he didn't get the points, so I ended up being the only one.

Once in college, students initially felt a sense of isolation and of 'feeling lost'. Some felt disoriented by the size of the campus and the distance between different lecture rooms. Moreover, the number of students in the lecture halls

made it difficult for young people to forge connections with their fellow students. This was particularly the case for those in the larger faculties, such as arts and science:

> I knew no one coming down here, there was no one from my school... I was kind of worried because my course was so big. I mean when we went in the first day there was 400 people in the lecture theatre and obviously I was used to small, tight-knit classes and teachers that knew your name. They are such big lecture halls you don't really make friends that quickly by going into classes and sitting next to someone new every time.

In a few cases, students' sense of being 'alone' was compounded by the fact that other young people appeared to have come to college with friends from school:

> Some people on my course [law], they would probably have gone to school together, so they all came in together... so it's like, you're a bit nervous. It's like they don't want to blend in with other people, they've got their own little clique.

Whilst having to make a new set of friends was seen as a daunting prospect by some students, it is important to note that there were variations within the group. A few young people said that they had looked forward to meeting new people in college and had made friends quickly and easily. In the following example, one student attributes this to her 'outgoing' personality:

> Well I settled in really fast. I made friends pretty fast. But I'm pretty outgoing and I would talk to anyone. I wouldn't be afraid to go over and start a conversation with somebody and say, 'I don't know anyone,'...so I think that kind of makes life a bit easier for me...I love meeting new people anyway. I'm a bit of an adventurer. I like going to new places and I'll make friends wherever I go.

For most students the process of making friends was a more gradual process. Participants found the HEAR orientation event – whereby students spend three days on campus before term begins – to be particularly helpful in meeting other students. They also got involved in student life through clubs and societies. By the end of first year all of the students we interviewed had developed a group of friends, though it was clear that these networks varied, both in size and stability. John, for example, had made a large group of friends through his course and through participation in a range of extra-curricular activities, particularly sports. On the other hand, Joanne commuted from her family home into college every day and had fewer opportunities to participate in non-academic activities. While she had befriended a few of her classmates in first year, Joanne was concerned because they were taking different subjects in second year and would no longer be in the same lectures and tutorials. In anticipation of this, some of the social anxieties she felt before starting first year had returned ('I'm kind of scared for second year...but I'm saying to myself "You'll make new friends"'). Joanne's experience illustrates the challenges in relation to participation faced by students who continue to live at home or at a significant distance from college, a theme that has been highlighted in previous research (Meehan and Howells, 2017; Wilcox et al., 2005). Her account also suggests that having to make new friends is not necessarily confined to first year: where students take different course options to their friends in subsequent years they may find themselves (socially) starting over again, particularly if their friendships were founded on shared courses, as in Joanne's case.

So far we have outlined some of the challenges that new students face when they enter university and the factors that can make it difficult for them to settle in, notably large class sizes and living at home rather than on campus. Previous research suggests that working-class students may also struggle to fit in socially because of the traditionally middle class make-up of higher education, particularly in the older and more prestigious universities (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003: 601; Ramburuth and Härtel, 2010; Read et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2010). In the following section we will look more closely at participants' sense of belonging and of fitting in in university, with particular reference to their social-class background.

FITTING IN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Participants spoke openly about coming from poorer families and communities, primarily in relation to their motives for wanting to go to college, the challenges that they faced along the way and their feelings of achievement when they were offered a place. However, while coming from a particular social background informed accounts of their journey to college, this theme was less evident in descriptions of their experiences while in college. Students' initial

concerns about making new friends, for example, were not constructed in terms of class differences, though it was noted on several occasions that some students had more money to socialise. Paradoxically a few students even appeared to be less conscious of class distinctions in university than they had been in their hometowns, where assumptions were made on the basis of where you lived, your family background and the school you attended. One participant, for example, told us that teachers in her school 'put you into a social bracket' and had generally lower expectations of those coming from the local council estate. For this student, the relative anonymity of the lecture system, while alarming in some respects, was also a liberating experience.

In common with Reay et al. (2009), we found that some students appeared to have a greater sense of fitting in as learners in HE than they had at school. For instance, participants said that one of the positive elements of college life was meeting other people who shared their interests and aspirations, as the following comment illustrates:

> In school it was just a random bunch of teenagers but now in university you are in with people who have similar interests. So I love the fact that you can make really good friends with people with really similar interests and possibly people who you might have a career with, in the future, in chemistry.

Overall, there was little overt evidence to suggest that this group of young people felt excluded on the basis of social class. However, this does not mean that they were unaware of, or did not experience, 'class-cultural discontinuities' (Lehmann, 2007) when they first entered college. Some participants commented, for example, on the contrast between the disadvantaged communities in which they had grown up and the scale and relative affluence of the campus, particularly its older (nineteenth century) sections. As one student recalled: 'It was intimidating coming in, especially coming from where I'm coming from and then seeing all this'. Moreover, these students did not display the sense of 'university entitlement', often found amongst middle-class cohorts (Crozier et al., 2008). Instead, they appeared to be surprised and grateful to have been accepted into the university: 'It was such an honour to even be here coming from where I live,'; 'I just felt so lucky to be the only one in my family to be here,'; 'I can't believe I am actually here.' While these young people appeared to have been initially overwhelmed at having 'made it' to college, over time they developed a sense of belonging and of being part of the social and academic life of the university. Like the students in Finnegan and Merrill's (2017) research, they were generally very positive about going to university and made comments such as: 'I love the atmosphere in college,'; 'I feel really at home here,'; 'I love it here.' There were, of course, variations in how strongly this sense of belonging was expressed and, despite enjoying college, participants reported occasional feelings of loneliness and missing home.

For one student the issue of belonging and fitting in in higher education was more complex, leading to what Aries and Seider (2005) have described as the compartmentalisation of different elements of her life (see also Keane, 2011b: 456). As a Traveller, Mary comes from one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities in Irish society (Watson et al., 2017) and one of the most under-represented groups in higher education (Department of Education and Skills, 2006; Higher Education Authority, 2015). The disjunction between home/background and college was a recurring theme in our interview with this student, as it impacted on her pathway to HE and her experiences of college life. Mary's family initially opposed her plans to go to college, on the grounds that she could face discrimination or that she would lose touch with her Traveller roots. While her parents eventually came to terms with her plans – on the condition that she lived at home – other members of the family continued to have reservations.

When she first started college, Mary struggled to make a connection with her fellow students. Feeling beleaguered at home and isolated in college, she came close to dropping out in the first month:

> I was so nervous. And I will admit for the first two or three weeks...I would talk to no one. Because I didn't make friends. I'm a really shy person and I don't like talking to people, like, full on. And, you know, with strange people I'm like [makes a panicked face and laughs]. So getting to know people was hard. But once I get to know people then I'm myself. I open up...So it was hard the first couple of weeks. There was this voice in my head [saying] 'Is it worth it?' And everyone was putting me down [at home] at the time as well 'cos it was my first couple of weeks. Everyone was putting me down. And I was talking to no one [at university]; I had no friends. And it was really hard, but it got better.

Despite a difficult start, Mary continued with her course and by the end of first year she had made friends and was enjoying her studies. However, from Mary's descriptions it was clear that the different parts of her life were kept strictly separate. In college, she had not told her fellow students that she was a member of the Traveller community. Although she felt that the other students would be accepting, past experiences of discrimination had made her wary.

One of the interesting paradoxes in our research was that while students initially missed their homes and communities, they also spoke favourably about the sense of anonymity in college. Outside of their familiar surroundings, some students reported a feeling of liberation, whereby they could 'be themselves'. Rachel, who described herself as coming from a 'strict home', explained that although she sometimes felt 'alone' in college, she also felt that she had developed as a person because of the experience. At home her sense of identity was too much bound up with that of her family and friends:

> You just get to develop and grow as a person...I think sometimes when you're with family and you're with friends, you know it's [about] conformity. There's certain ways, you act a certain way all the time. Moving away from home, no one knew me here. I could do whatever I want and no one would actually know that 'oh that's out of her character' or whatever. So it was completely a brand-new slate. I could just be myself, you know. That's one of the best things about college, I think. And the independence is good as well, like you're, you get to grow as a person, completely separate from everyone else.

In other instances, students described the liberating feeling of moving away from home to a city and university where no one knew them.

ACADEMIC TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO COLLEGE

We have looked so far at the social and personal issues raised by students, in terms of their expectations and experiences of college. Another significant theme concerned the academic culture in college, including class sizes, level of contact with teaching staff, independent learning, systems of assessment and so forth. In line with previous research (e.g. Read et al., 2003), we found that some students were initially disconcerted by the shift to independent learning in college and the relative lack of supervision by lecturers compared to school. Whilst some participants reported that their lecturers were friendly and approachable, there were nonetheless restrictions on the level of contact, given the class sizes. Students missed not only the academic support and supervision, but also the pastoral care of teachers who knew them on a personal level:

> Yea it's quite lonely, it's quite lonely...Like, you know in secondary school, people actually cared about you. You could tell that teachers actually wanted you to do your homework. Or wanted you to succeed and talk to you. And if you got into any altercation at home, you know, you had someone to talk to...you know they'd actually care enough to be like, 'You don't seem okay.' But I feel like no one gets to really know you enough to come and talk to you here [in college]. If you were a student that was getting [100%] and then one day you got 30%, the lecturer wouldn't come to you and say, 'Okay what's wrong?' do you know what I mean? A teacher back then would've been like, 'Okay this is not your usual, what's going on, is everything okay?' But a lecturer, they just put it through a machine, they don't really care what you get, you know. So, you kind of feel sometimes kind of, 'Ugh, I'm just by myself. It's me against the world.'

Previous research suggests that students from disadvantaged backgrounds often lack confidence in their ability to meet the academic standards in college (Keane, 2011a; Reay et al., 2009). Even experience of earlier academic success may not compensate for the self-doubt 'that inevitably emerges when confronted with a totally unfamiliar educational field' (Reay, 2009: 1112). Our findings are broadly in line with earlier studies in this regard: for many students, uncertainty about their own ability was one of their main concerns before enrolling and during the first few months of college. For example, one student (who regularly received high marks in school tests) told us, 'I think my fears were, maybe not being able for the information. Not being able for the classes.' In a few cases students who were accustomed to being 'top of the class' were nervous about competing with students from other schools, where they feared the standards might be very different:

> In my school I was top of the class, in most of my classes. And then when you come to university you have people coming from all over the country, even outside the country. And you don't know the standards ...Is the educational level that I'm taking [in school] the same as everybody else? Because different schools have different levels, you know?

Although some of the students in our study initially found the academic transition from school to college challenging, in the course of the year they gained in confidence. Successfully completing coursework and exams provided an important boost to their academic self-confidence, as one student explained:

> You're jumping from a level five [Leaving Certificate] to a level eight [four-year degree] and that was the immediate worry – that the course would be a lot harder and the expectations a lot higher, and all that. But after I got my first few assignments back…they were all fairly good. So that kind of built up my confidence. That would be the only thing now that, before I came here, that would have worried me – that there's a big gap between [school and college]. I realise now, if you put in the effort… you can bridge that, no bother. You have to put in a lot more work alright. But if you have an interest in it, like, you don't really mind, you know that's not really like work.

Students reported that one of the most positive elements of the transition from school to college was that they were able to concentrate on subjects that interested them and for which they had an aptitude. A recurring theme in the research was that while the work may be more challenging in university relative to school, this is mitigated by the fact that students can focus on subjects that they enjoy. In the following extract, for example, Rachel compares her experiences of study in school and college:

> [In university] you get to do something that you love every day, you know. Like I remember in secondary school I hated maths, I absolutely detested maths…Now you're just doing what you love. Like, I love science, you know, I love to wake up every morning, go into college and study science, so that's great.

In addition, several students noted that the system of continuous assessment in college (including graded assignments/coursework) and having examinations at different points in the year was far less stressful than the Leaving Certificate Examination.

WHAT HELPED?

In the final section of this chapter we will explore the aspects of college life identified by students as helping them to settle in and develop peer relationships during their first few months.

Almost all participants said that they had found the three-day orientation, run as part of the HEAR programme, to be particularly helpful and that it was through this event that they initially got to know people. The HEAR orientation combines information sessions (e.g. campus tours, faculty introductory sessions) with evening social events. Perhaps most importantly, students stay in campus accommodation for the three days, sharing an apartment with four to eight students from their course. The importance of shared accommodation for establishing friendships in the first year of college has been highlighted in the literature (Thomas, 2002; Wilcox et al., 2005). Comments from students who participated in the HEAR orientation suggest that even sharing for a relatively short period of time may be helpful, particularly where students are on the same course and likely to see each other again when college formally starts. For instance, one participant recalled:

> The HEAR orientation is more intimate, rather than being with a big crowd of people. I remember on the first night, we [others in apartment] all walked to a local shop together. That's how we became friends…and since then we've been friends, since that day.

Most participants had stayed in contact with the people they had met during the three days and, in some cases, now counted them as being amongst their closest friends. It was notable that while the HEAR orientation has a number of functions – informational and social – it was the latter that students focused on in their recollections of 'what helped' when they first started college.

Some students had found the university clubs and societies useful in getting to know other people, particularly where these linked to pre-existing interests (e.g., in sports, music, etc.) or where the clubs/societies were linked to their course (e.g. the Government and Politics Society). However, comments from one student suggest that joining a club/society solely to meet people, but having no real interest in the area, may be problematic. Monica recalled signing up 'for loads of things', including weightlifting, but when she went to her first session 'they were all very serious and cross, so I was "Ok I am not going there anymore!"' Only one student spoke of group-work as having helped him to meet others on his course. This may indicate a lack of opportunities for group working within courses, though with such a limited sample this is clearly an issue that needs further investigation.

Apart from the institutional supports described above, participants also commented on the 'friendly' environment and the 'atmosphere' on campus at the beginning of first year. They described a sense of openness and commonality amongst

new entrants to college, which made it easier for them to get to know one another. As one student explained: 'Nobody really knows anyone, so it's not weird to go up and start talking to people.' This was facilitated by various activities and events on campus, for example as part of Freshers' Week. One participant noted that this openness to meeting new people was a particular feature of first year, making it all the more important to form peer relationships at this stage:

> You don't want to spend three or four years regretting that you didn't make friends in first year. Because it's going to be a lot harder next year. There are no big induction days, we're not freshers anymore. There [aren't] things on every day in order for freshers to be able to meet new people. So I'd say it would be tougher to make new friends. Whereas in first year, it's easier.

While making new friends was seen as one of the most daunting aspects of the transition to higher education, once established, these friendships became one of the most positive aspects of college life. Several students spoke, for example, of having made 'friends for life'. In the following extract, Brian, who was initially "terrified" because he knew no one in the university, describes the closeness that comes from students sharing different aspects of their life, both academic and social:

> The friends you make are really like no friends you have had before, like you might have been in school and had a best friend but no, really, the friends you make in college are completely different. But in a better way... you meet up with them, talk, go for a coffee, do assignments together, share a house, go out together. You really do get so close to your friends and hopefully then they will be friends for life.

In common with previous research (e.g. Thomas, 2002; Wilcox et al., 2005) we found that peer relationships were an important source of emotional support for young people, most of whom were living away from their families for the first time. For instance, participants recalled how friends had sustained them through periods of homesickness and exam-related stress: 'When everything just gets too much, it's really my friends, my friends are always there for me,'; 'The teamwork between your friends actually helps get you through the year.' Finally, social networks provided help and encouragement in relation to academic work: students spoke for instance, of working on assignments together, going to the library in the evening and so on.

CONCLUSION

The social dimension of university life was a recurring theme in our research with undergraduate students, featuring in discussions on their hopes and fears before enrolling; the challenges they faced in the early weeks; the most positive aspects of college life; and the supports that sustained them over the years. Moreover, when asked what advice they would now give to new entrants, their comments were concerned largely with encouraging them to get involved, join clubs and so forth. Our findings echo previous international research on the importance of the social/relational part of college life, particularly to first-year students (e.g. Maunder, 2017; Meehan and Howells, 2017).

Anxiety about making new friends predominated in students' accounts of the transition and their early weeks at university. Whilst making friends may well be a concern for most, if not all, new students, it is likely that it is more so for students from under-represented groups, because many, particularly those from lower socio-economic groups, are not accompanied by friends from school and/or wider social circles, whereas traditional school-leaver entrants usually are (Keane, 2009: 94). None of the students in our research had friends in college when they started, and this was a source of considerable anxiety. Moreover, most said that they had little idea of what to expect either socially or academically and initially felt disoriented by the size of the campus and the striking contrast with their own communities. Their sense of being alone was exacerbated by class sizes, which ran to several hundred, making it difficult to strike up connections with their fellow students. Those who continued to live at home had fewer opportunities to socialise and participate in clubs and societies.

In common with previous studies on the transition to university (Maunder, 2017; Wilcox et al., 2005), our findings indicate that new students need support to deal not only with the academic culture shock of adapting to the higher education environment, but also the emotional shock of moving from the familiar home environment to a very different life in university. As Maunder (2017) points out, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) need to take students' social experience at university seriously and actively encourage friendship development in the early stages, for example through structured group activities during classes and organised social events. The evidence from our research indicates that, for first-generation students, generic support programmes need to be supplemented by more targeted supports. It was significant that when asked what helped, the students in our research spoke mainly

of the numerically smaller, more targeted orientation event and supports provided through the HEAR programme. As we have seen, the three-day residential orientation was important in terms of an initial ice-breaker for new entrants and in several cases led to lasting friendships.

Finally, it was clear from the research that students' impressions of the social and academic culture in college were quite varied and included both positive and negative elements. For example, students often missed the level of support provided by teachers, but on the other hand they appreciated being with students who shared their academic interests and career aspirations. Moreover, while many of the students initially experienced feelings of loneliness, by the end of their first year they had all formed a network of friends though, as noted earlier, these appeared to vary both in size and stability. Overall, the research findings point to a diversity of experience – encompassing both the challenges and rewards of college life for working-class students – an area that warrants further investigation, particularly in the Irish HE sector where so few studies currently exist.

CHAPTER 5: YOUNG PEOPLE'S ORIENTATIONS TOWARDS HIGHER EDUCATION: ASPIRATIONS, MOTIVATIONS AND ENABLERS

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we present the findings on young people's aspirations, their views on higher education and (where applicable) their motives for wanting to go on to higher education. The data presented here derives from the survey and seven focus groups with senior-cycle students in the six schools, as well as interviews with teachers and parents.

FUTURE PLANS AND ASPIRATIONS

In the schools survey, senior-cycle students were asked what they would like to do when they finished school. A total of 66% (n=200) of respondents said that they wanted to progress to higher education (see Table 5.1), though in a later question a slightly smaller proportion (60%, n=181) said that they were either definitely or probably going to apply, or that there was an equal chance that they would/would not apply (3%, n=9). There were also variations between schools. Significantly very few young people said that they wanted to start work straight from school (just over 3%): the majority hoped to go on to HE, further education (FE) or other training.

TABLE 5.1: FUTURE PLANS

	FREQUENCY	%
Go to university	135	44.6
Study at an institute of technology	54	17.8
Go to teacher training college	11	3.6
Study at a further education college	26	8.6
Start working	10	3.3
Start an apprenticeship/learn a trade	25	8.3
Don't know	17	5.6
Other	13	4.3
No Response	12	4
TOTAL	**303**	**100**

MOTIVATIONS AND IMPRESSIONS OF COLLEGE LIFE

The survey found that most young people who wanted to go on to higher education were motivated by a desire to improve their job prospects (95%) and increase their chances of working in an area that interests them (97%). Social and personal reasons also featured, including a desire to become more independent (79%); to meet new people and make new friends (69%); and to experience life as a student (66%). The reasons why young people might want to progress to HE and their impressions of college life were explored in more detail through the focus groups, the main findings from which are reported below.

Career and future life opportunities

Improved career prospects were by far the strongest motivation for young people to want to go on to higher education (documented 55 times in written focus-group materials). Focus-group participants spoke about not wanting to 'get stuck in a dead-end job' or 'end up on the dole'. In their view, going to college meant getting a well-paid job, having a career and better life opportunities. The following were some of their comments:

> I wrote employment value, as in like, for example, if you've got a degree then you are going to get the job over someone who wouldn't have a degree.

> The idea most people have [for going to college] is what I can do after that can provide a standard of living I'd like and not just be working on the average minimum wage, just about getting by, but what they can actually get and actually be interested in and get a proper wage off of.

However, there were also some differences of opinion with regards to the value of higher education, as the following extract from a focus group in Dublin illustrates. While most young people in this focus group felt that higher education was a prerequisite for secure, well-paid employment, one participant (S2) questioned this:

> **S1:** With education you get more money.
> **S2:** Some people didn't even go to school and they have jobs.
> **S1:** Yeah and they are getting shit pay... The reason I'm staying in school and what college is for... is to make a future for myself. If I have kids, to provide for them.
> **S2:** You don't have to go to college for that.
> **S1:** But you don't get as much money just doing a normal job.
> **S3:** I know my mam had to go back to college to finish her levels for childcare before she got a proper job in Montessori.
> **S1:** Everything, you just need to have certificates for everything nowadays, that's all.
> **S2:** What?
> **S3:** It's all down to one certificate and one degree on a piece of paper, and that's all.

Teachers at the six case-study schools reported that young people see higher education in largely instrumental terms, as a means of getting a good job and having a better standard of living than their parents. Furthermore, changes in the labour market over the last decade have had an impact on aspirations, according to several of the teachers interviewed. During the economic boom (early 2000s) young people were able to get jobs straight after school, particularly in the construction sector. Not only are there now fewer opportunities for school-leavers, but some children saw their parents lose their jobs. The principal of one rural school noted that these experiences may have left an impression on young people when it comes to career choice:

> I think to be honest with you the recession probably taught them an awful lot, you know, about the various jobs that can be affected severely by the recession and the various jobs that aren't and I guess this age group, they were eight, nine, ten years of age, they were in the middle of it, Mom and Dad came home and they hadn't the money, you know, those situations, so I think they've experienced that. So that's in their mindset probably, they might see certain professions that can [weather a recession], whereas the builder, the electrician, the plumber, they were the first persons to be gone in the recession. Obviously, we'd have kids here like that [whose parents lost their jobs].

Parents from the case-study schools also believed that leaving education with minimal qualifications would result in a diminished capacity to compete in an increasingly competitive labour market, an issue that we return to in chapter 7.

The social dimensions of college and meeting new people

Focus-group participants identified a range of positive experiential and social aspects of attending college, including meeting new people, a vibrant social life and access to various leisure pursuits (e.g. gym, swimming pool, running tracks, clubs and societies). The college social life was often associated with going to clubs, pubs, parties and college balls. However, while participants had generally positive perceptions about the 'college experience', they also expressed feelings of anxiety about the prospect of moving to a new area, not knowing anyone in college and potentially losing contact with existing friends. These issues will be considered in detail in chapter 6.

Independence and Autonomy

The theme of 'independence' featured prominently in discussions on motivations for going to college and impressions of what college life would be like. Young people in the focus groups spoke about going to college as a chance to mature and to make their own life choices. In their discussions they often contrasted their experiences of school with the anticipated independence of college:

> The weird thing is that your school life, until you go to college, from junior infants to sixth year, you are conforming your whole life. And when you get to college it's completely different, it broadens the horizons, it's all new.
>
> Yeah, exactly it's all up to you.
>
> Your experiences are a lot different when you are in college. You are your own person, you can do what you want.

Young people also spoke about gaining autonomy as learners:

> Secondary school kind of tells you what to think but third level allows you to have your own opinions on things.

They spoke at length about the challenges of having to study up to eight subjects for the Leaving Certificate in order to accumulate points or meet specific requirements (e.g. compulsory languages), rather than because the subjects were of interest to them. This contrasted with how they viewed higher education, where students can pursue their own interests:

> There's more motivation to go to college [rather than school], because it's something that you want to do in college, you get to pick.
>
> You can pick any course you want to do, like here [in school] I dread going to some classes.
>
> You can study what you want. Not what you are given.

Participants felt that while the work in college might be demanding, this was offset by the fact that students can focus on a small number of subjects that they themselves choose. Furthermore, students in all seven focus groups felt that college would be less stressful and 'fairer' because the system of assessment did not rely on performance in one final set of exams, as is the case for most Leaving Certificate subjects. This again made college more appealing than school.

The greater level of independence third-level students have in relation to their attendance and participation was also viewed in a positive light:

> You have more freedom, more responsibility – teachers aren't going to chase you if you don't have your stuff done. You're studying something you like...you have a choice whether to go to college or not.

However, a few participants were not sure that this level of independence was necessarily a good thing:

> I wouldn't be too gone on the part where you are not pushed on what to do...if you're not pushed you could be just lackadaisical.

Overall, the students in the six schools had a positive view of higher education, particularly when compared with school, as the following extract illustrates:

> **S1:** Everything there just sounds…
>
> **S2:** Better.
>
> **S3:** Everything in college just sounds better.

Earlier studies suggest that young people from working-class backgrounds may be ambivalent or hostile to higher education (see for example Hutchings and Archer, 2001; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998). Undertaking third-level education was constructed in negative terms, including having to 'engage in hard, boring activity for long hours' in 'vast and unattractive university buildings' (Hutching and Archer, 2001: 80–81). However, as noted in chapter 3, other studies suggest that young people from working-class communities are more positively disposed toward HE, even those who were not planning to go there themselves (Baker et al., 2014; Bradley and Miller, 2010; James, 2002; Kettley and Whitehead, 2012). Our findings are broadly in line with the latter body of work: most young people had favourable perceptions of college life and saw HE as a route to a better standard of living.

FACTORS THAT WOULD ENABLE YOUNG PEOPLE TO PROGRESS TO HE

We have looked so far at young people's motivations and impressions of college life. In the course of the fieldwork, students and teachers were also asked what would help or enable young people from these schools to go on to higher education. Several themes emerged, including: financial support; information from teachers and/or career guidance counsellors; parental support; and access schemes such as HEAR. These points are outlined briefly below.

Financial Supports

All participants in the research (parents, teachers, students) noted the vital role of student grants in enabling young people from disadvantaged areas to progress to higher education. Focus-group participants noted that qualifying for a grant to cover registration and living expenses would be the single greatest determinant of whether they went on to HE. However, it was clear that some young people and their parents found the grant application procedures confusing (the SUSI website was singled out for particular criticism) and they were unsure if the grant would cover all costs. In the course of the fieldwork, parents and students asked several questions about the grant system and the cost of living in college, which suggests that accessing information on the grants system may be an issue. The researchers were clearly seen as having 'insider knowledge'.

Focus-group respondents highlighted the importance of being able to access public transport and affordable accommodation. The availability of accommodation not only influenced whether young people went to college, but also where they went, an issue we return to in chapter 6.

Information from Teachers and/or Career Guidance Counsellors (CGCs)

Receiving adequate support, encouragement and career guidance from teachers and CGCs was identified as important in enabling young people to progress to higher education. In some cases students reported that their teachers had organised open days, helped them complete CAO forms and provided them with course information. According to one student, being in a DEIS school was a potential advantage when it comes to career guidance: 'If we weren't a DEIS school we wouldn't get as much career guidance.' However, not all young people felt they were getting enough career guidance and said that they would have benefited from additional support:

> We are not informed, if we look it up ourselves on the internet there is, but in school there is not a lot, only in 5th and 6th year, that's the year to decide.
>
> Unless you ask your career guidance teacher, but you can't ask them every single question. You can't be annoying them either like.

In the student survey young people were also asked if they had received information/advice on higher education and the source of this information/advice. A wide range of people (e.g. schools career guidance teachers, family members), events (e.g. open days) and resources (e.g. the internet) were indicated. In a follow-up question, students were asked to identify the most useful source of information/advice. Their responses are shown in Table 5.2 below. As we can see, teachers and career guidance counsellors were the single largest category, followed by college open days.

TABLE 5.2: SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND ADVICE

Main source of Information/Advice on Higher Education	%
Career guidance counsellors & teachers	30
Open days	15
Internet	10
Parents/guardians	8
Brothers/sisters	5
Higher education students	4
Presentations from staff from HEIs	3
Brochures/prospectuses/leaflets	3
Other family members	2
Friends	2
Question not answered	19
TOTAL	**100%**

Parental Support

Parental support and encouragement were identified as important in enabling young people to progress to HE. Several focus-group participants stated that if their parents were not supportive, it would discourage them from applying to college. As one young person pointed out:

> I want to be a primary school teacher, both of my parents are supportive with that, but if my da was like 'Nah, why don't you do something else?', then I would definitely be thinking of changing my mind to suit both of them.

Similar points about the role of parental support and encouragement were raised in another focus group, although it was also noted that undue pressure to attend college could be counterproductive:

S1: If your parents are constantly telling you, 'Oh, don't bother with it,' you are just going to sit back and do nothing. But if your parents are very determined, if they are like 'We want you to go to college.'
S2: Yeah because they didn't have the opportunity.
S3: If you have siblings who did a course in university, there's kind of pressure.
S4: You need 50/50 of it – to push you but not overly push you into it. If they over push you, you're going to hate it but if they don't push us, you mightn't want to go at all.

The role of parents and families in supporting education and aspirations was a recurring theme in the interviews with teachers. One school principal described the critical difference that parents can make:

> I mean there are parents here who really want the best for their children, I mean I have a number of students they're in third year and I feel they'll go to [university] because their parents are very ambitious and want the best for them and they're not afraid of those changes, but we need to keep supporting the parents, the parents are a vital part of this equation.

Similarly, another principal spoke at length about the importance of parental support:

> ...if you look at the students who are achieving very, very well in their Leaving Cert., they availed of all the supports that are in the school, and there are significant supports in the school. And the one thing they have in common is they have a significant person in their lives, really, really significant, who is supportive – doesn't necessarily need to know everything about the Leaving Cert. and points and everything, but they're a strong person for them, right – very often it's a mother.

While teachers consistently reported that parents valued education, particularly as a route to a better future for their children, most qualified their answers by suggesting that parents were not always in a position to provide the kinds of supports and advice that would improve their children's chances of educational success and progression to HE, an issue that we will return to in the following chapter.

Access Schemes

Some participants in the focus groups were aware of the HEAR and DARE (Disability Access Route to Education) schemes and felt that they would make college entry more achievable. Teachers also reported that access events and initiatives (open days, Easter/summer camps, homework clubs) have helped to break down some of the barriers to HE. They identified three main benefits to college access programmes. First, they fostered an interest in higher education amongst young people who had no family history of HE. Second, access programmes help school students prepare for college and gave them a better sense of what to expect. Finally, some access programmes contribute to school work and exam preparation, for example though homework and revision clubs run by college students. In the following extract one principal describes the benefits her pupils derive from homework clubs, which provide practical support while also sparking an interest in higher education:

> I think the strength is that you're getting people talking about university, that's a good thing, it's in the landscape, it's there and I think it's wonderful that we have volunteers from the [university] who come up to our students. There's kind of a twin, there's a dual purpose to that, one is they're helping them with their homework practically, but in a very real sense they're having conversations as well about college and university. And these are, these are people that our students can relate to, you know, they're not that much older than them. It isn't a case of just coming up, helping with their homework, it's much more than that, you know, it's much more than that.

While the feedback from teachers on different access schemes was generally very positive, it was noted that schools from outside the cities are less able to take advantage of certain initiatives, particularly those provided on an on-going basis such as the homework clubs. College summer and Easter camps may also be difficult for pupils from rural schools to attend because of the need to arrange accommodation. Moreover, some of the programmes require a good deal of commitment and so have to be carefully coordinated and reviewed if they are to succeed. For example, the homework clubs in DEIS schools require considerable buy-in, both from the school students and from the college students providing tuition.

CONCLUSION

Low aspirations are often viewed as a major barrier to closing educational-attainment gaps and increasing levels of social mobility (Baker et al., 2014). However, in line with a number of UK-based studies (Baker et al., 2014; Bradley and Miller, 2010; Kettley and Whitehead, 2012) our findings revealed that young people are interested in progressing to higher education and had generally positive perceptions of college life. Several teachers also spoke of a generational change in the educational aspirations of young people from these communities. At the same time the research pointed to a number of barriers to access to HE, which we will explore in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6:
BARRIERS TO ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

As we saw in chapter 5, the majority of young people in the six case-study schools aspire to go to college: a total of 66% of respondents said that they wanted to progress to HE, though a slightly smaller proportion (60%, n=181) said that they were 'very likely' or 'fairly likely' to apply. However, the reality is that a significantly lower proportion of young people from these schools are likely to enrol, based on progression rates from previous years. The main barriers to access identified by participants in the research are outlined in this chapter and include a number of inter-related themes: economic constraints; confidence issues; family history of HE and supports for education in the home; and levels of academic attainment.

ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS ON ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

The findings of our research suggest that economic factors affect access to HE on a number of levels. While some factors arise at the point of entry to college (e.g. registration fees and accommodation) others reflect longer-term issues and deep-seated inequalities within Irish society.

Cost of Higher Education

The interviews and focus groups suggest that the cost of HE continues to be a source of concern for potential entrants and their families. Financial issues were raised repeatedly in interviews with teachers and parents, although there were some notable variations. Parents who said that their children were unlikely to go on to HE did not identify cost as a deciding factor. Instead they reported that their children either did not have the confidence to apply to HE (discussed later) or, more often, that they had particular aptitudes and interests that led them to careers that did not necessarily require a HE qualification (see chapter 7). However, for parents who said that their children were planning to apply to college, the costs involved were often their primary concern. Parents worried, for example that their children might not qualify for the full grant, that the grant would not be adequate or that some costs (e.g. deposits on accommodation) might be payable before the grant was issued. It was clear that reliance on a grant presented challenges, particularly for those who were not familiar with the qualifying criteria or application process. In the following extract, one parent describes her anxieties about the cost of HE and the impact this could have on her daughter's decision-making:

> What I am going to say to [my partner] in future, when we are talking about college is: 'Don't mention nothing about the money.' Because she [their daughter] is an awful worrier and if she kind of heard us speaking about that now she might get it into her head then, 'Oh I couldn't have mam and dad under that pressure.' She could change her mind very easily then. Do you know, because she would feel that she would have us under too much pressure.

In the student survey, respondents who were interested in going on to HE indicated that cost was a concern: 55% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, 'I don't know if I will be able to find enough money to pay for fees and living expenses,' 24% were not sure and only 20% disagreed with the statement. Financial issues were also a significant theme in the focus groups. In the following extract, students from one rural school spoke of their concerns about becoming a financial burden on their families, if they went to college:

> **S1:** It puts families under a lot of pressure.
> **S2**: Especially if, say you are the eldest and you are going away and you still have two other or three other siblings at home and they need the money as well. I'd say they'd support you alright but it's just the fact you'd feel bad.
> **S3:** You wouldn't like asking them for the money.
> **S4:** They'd say they don't mind but at the same time you don't want to be kind of [asking them].
> **S1:** They could do a lot with that money instead of spending it on you in college.

The students' comments here are reminiscent of Ball et al.'s (2002b: 57) argument that for working-class young people, decisions around whether to attend college are never straightforward. Decisions have to be weighed up on a number of fronts, with costs featuring as an important consideration. According to the principal at one Dublin school, financial issues take on an added significance when families are marginally outside the qualifying range for a student grant, as might be the case in households where both parents work in low-income jobs. Supporting a child through college could place considerable financial strain on these families.

Financial considerations also placed restrictions on where young people went to college and, in some instances, what they studied. In the student survey, over three quarters of respondents said that 'the cost of living and studying' was an 'important or very important' consideration when choosing where to apply. A recurring theme in the fieldwork in the four city schools was that young people would apply to local universities or ITs so that they could continue to live at home, thereby saving on the costs of accommodation. Students from the two rural schools did not have the option of living at home, if they wanted to attend university, therefore the cost of accommodation was a significant factor in their choice of college. The prohibitive cost of living in the capital was raised by students from both of the rural schools, one of whom asserted, 'No one goes to Dublin 'cos there's no accommodation, it's just too expensive.'

Poverty and Associated Problems

While all of the areas included in our research were categorised as disadvantaged, principals and community workers noted that certain families and housing estates were significantly worse off than others. From the descriptions given, it was clear that some young people – particularly in the urban areas – lived in conditions of extreme poverty, which often affected school attendance, academic performance and aspiration. Disadvantaged communities were hard hit by the recession that unfolded from 2008 onwards, resulting in high levels of unemployment, welfare cuts and significant increases in the numbers of people living in consistent poverty or 'at risk' of poverty (Dukelow and Considine, 2017; NESDO, 2013: 50–51). Children were particularly vulnerable to the effects of the economic crisis (NESDO, 2013: xii). Participants in our research reported that food poverty became a problem in certain areas of Dublin and Cork, with young people coming to school hungry and being unable to concentrate. As one youth worker explained:

> Parents want their kids to do well, but it just kind of falls down the priority list, poverty is still a big issue. Like food poverty, it's a big issue that kids are going to school hungry. Now [a local primary school] has started a breakfast club, because kids were just coming with no food... The youth workers here would find it a big issue with kids coming for drop-in sessions and stuff, that they're really coming for the sausage sandwich. Because they've had nothing to eat.

Homelessness, sub-standard housing and overcrowding were also seen as significant social challenges in urban areas. Moreover, the stresses associated with poverty (e.g. threats of eviction, household debt) had a knock-on effect on the mental and physical health of both parents and children. Teachers and youth/community workers consistently reported that when families were struggling to cope, education was inevitably pushed down their list of priorities. In some instances, young people had to take on additional responsibilities, including the care of younger siblings, which further affected school attendance and performance. As one principal told us:

> I have a girl here in third year, she's extraordinarily bright. We spoke this morning, she was late for school, she was telling me that she was helping her mother with the younger children. She is put in a parent role at a very young age.

Having caring responsibilities for family members was also raised in several of the focus groups with young people (particularly in Dublin) as a potential barrier to HE. In most cases, participants discussed this issue in general rather than personal terms (e.g. 'you might have to take care of your parents'). It is not possible to tell if these young people were referencing personal experience or whether this was something they had observed in other families, but it is nonetheless significant that caregiving was raised in relation to education and future plans. It is indicative of the kinds of responsibilities that young people may have to assume, in addition to schoolwork. Over the last 15 years there has been an increasing recognition of the role that young people play in providing care to other family members and the impact that this can have on school attendance, academic performance and opportunities for further and higher education (Fives et al., 2010; O'Connell et al., 2008; SCIE, 2005). Nonetheless, the scale of this practice is believed to be underestimated because of the relative 'invisibility' of young caregivers (Fives et al., 2010).

Educational Resources: The Role of the Private Education Market

A recurring theme, particularly amongst teachers, was that middle-class students have a competitive advantage over their working-class peers as they can afford educational resources and services, notably grinds (private tuition) and grind schools. Previous research indicates that private tuition is now a significant part of exam preparation in Ireland, with nearly half of Leaving Certificate students taking grinds (Smyth, 2009). However, this system may further disadvantage students from poorer families for whom private tuition is not an option. One principal, for example, described the Irish educational system as being driven by 'market forces' in which students compete to get the points for entry to college. Grind schools have developed as a response to the points system, conferring advantage on those who can afford it and further exacerbating the existing inequalities in access to HE. The issue of private education was also raised in one of the focus groups with school students:

S1: Sometimes I feel like there is a separation because we come from a deprived area...One of my friends he went to [fee-paying school] and he was studying until 9 o'clock and things like that. I don't know, it's like sometimes there is still a separation in class, if that makes sense. There is obviously a gap to be bridged and you can't just lower the points for people in deprived areas. I think a lot of it stems from even your early education and stuff, it all needs to be on a par for a proper chance.
S2: It all comes down to money.
S3: If you don't have enough money and you are not doing well in a subject you might need tutors and you might not have the money for it, so you are down on the [Leaving Certificate] points.
S1: Basically if you are paying four grand a year to go to [fee-paying school]...then you obviously have money to go to college. So that's separation.... The teachers here [in this school] want to give people the same opportunities as those in say [fee-paying schools] but it's just the money that they are paying [interrupted]...
S4: We are not saying it's a bad school, just saying, in my opinion the schools that you have to pay for are a step ahead, a step above.

As this extract illustrates, young people were acutely aware of inequalites within the education system, particularly in relation to examination preparation.

Starting Work After School

In a small number of cases teachers and parents reported that young people wanted to start work after their Leaving Certificate Examination. Their motives were usually a desire to start earning, in combination with other factors: one parent noted, for example, that her son 'wasn't very academic' and wanted to start making money as soon as possible. However, foregoing further or higher education in order to start work was a relatively minor theme: only a small proportion of students in the survey (3%) said that they wanted to go straight to work. This was corroborated in the interviews with teachers, who reported that most of those who stayed on to the Leaving Certificate would progress to post-secondary education or training. It was noted that there are far fewer jobs available to school leavers, compared with the economic boom years up to 2008, and that the level of education required for different roles has increased significantly over time. As one student pointed out: 'You just need to have certificates for everything nowadays.' Despite this emphasis on qualifications, two of the urban schools reported that some students still leave after the Junior Certificate Examination, which is taken at ages 15 or 16. This was particularly the case for young people from the Traveller community. The issue of student retention clearly illustrates how 'key processes impacting on HE entry occur much earlier in the educational process' (McCoy et al., 2010: 6) and the importance of interventions at all stages of education to promote access to HE. We will return to the issue of early school leaving later in this chapter.

ISSUES OF CONFIDENCE AND CLASS IDENTITY

As noted in chapter 5, the secondary-school students in our research who were interested in progressing to higher education had generally positive views of college, thanks in part to the access initiatives in which their schools participate. For example, focus-group participants identified a range of positive experiential and social aspects of attending college, including greater independence, being able to study a subject that interests you, an active social life and access to sports and leisure facilities. Despite these positive impressions, these young people nonetheless

found it difficult to picture themselves going to college. A lack of confidence in their ability to successfully transition from school to college continues to be a significant barrier to progression, according to all groups of participants in the study: teachers, community workers, parents and young people themselves. When asked what might make it difficult to get to college, or what might deter them from applying, students in all seven focus groups mentioned feelings of stress, anxiety and a lack of confidence. In some instances, young people reported doubts about their academic ability to achieve the necessary entry points or meet the standards of work in college. Another major area of concern related to the social and relational dimension of college life. Some participants expressed feelings of anxiety about the prospect of moving to a new area, not knowing anyone in college, having to make new friends in unfamiliar surroundings and losing contact with existing friends. The following were typical comments:

> There is social anxiety, say like, you feel comfortable in the school 'cos you basically know most of the people in the school and say you were to go to UCD or Maynooth there's going to be hundreds, thousands of students, like the place is going to be huge, you'll be anxious and all, you wouldn't know what to do.
>
> If you are there [in college] by yourself, say everyone in your class went off somewhere else and you are the only person who went there to do teaching or something and you are there by yourself.
>
> If you are in accommodation with people you don't know or you are trying to get to know them, you have no one to actually really talk to, like a proper friend.
>
> You could go to UCC for five years and when you come down here [rural community] you have lost all the friends you have here and everyone you knew in UCC have all gone their separate ways, gone back to their own county or different countries or whatever.

Participants in focus groups often identified the social life in college as one of its attractions. However, as the examples above illustrate, this was juxtaposed with descriptions of isolation and loneliness in which young people are 'by themselves', do not have 'a proper friend' to talk to and eventually lose 'all the friends' from home. While college was viewed as a sociable space, with many opportunities for making new friends, these young people appeared to position themselves on the outside of this, unsure of their own ability to fully participate in the social and relational dimension of college life. Their concerns about settling in were further compounded by the size and unfamiliarity of the campuses and numbers of students. A lack of familiarity with the HE system and the consequent difficulties involved in decision-making were also raised in the student survey: just over 50% of those students who wanted to go on to HE agreed with the statement, 'I don't know what to expect", while nearly 60% agreed that, 'It's very difficult choosing where to go and what to study.' Although it was clear from the focus groups that participants had favourable impressions of higher education, the idea of going to college was still a leap into the unknown and fraught with potential risks.

Comparatively few young people explicitly raised concerns about 'not fitting in' because of their social-class background, which has in the past been a significant theme in the literature on barriers to HE access (for example, Archer et al., 2007). This may in part be due to a reluctance to discuss their views in class terms, particularly in Ireland where 'there is a marked ambivalence about class' and where 'the organised working class has been quite weak' (Finnegan and Merrill, 2017). However, while issues relating explicitly to class differences were not prominent themes in focus groups, there was one notable exception where students at a Dublin school asserted that colleges were less likely to accept applicants from poorer areas. The following is an extract from that discussion:

S1: If there is someone say from…Blackrock [middle-class area] and they see an application from [this area] they are going to pick the person from Blackrock.
S2: Yeah more than likely, if it's between two of you and you have the higher points then they might pick you but if they are the same… If people have paid for their education, they look at them as smarter somehow, even though that's not the case.
S.3: Because you come from a disadvantaged area, or what people think is a disadvantaged area. They know that there is crime in your area, they probably think you are going to come in and start knocking down their statues or something. [Laughter]

Other participants in the research (parents, teachers and youth/community workers) also noted that young people may feel stigmatised because they come from a disadvantaged area, which lowers their confidence in applying for jobs or for college places. According to a community worker in Dublin, 'young people from this area feel, "If I put down [name of area] and they discover it's a halting site, even if I had 20 degrees, who's going to want me?"'

Similarly, in the following extract, one Dublin mother locates her daughter's lack of confidence (and that of her friends) in a wider social context of urban disadvantage and stigmatisation:

> It's 'cos they're from [names area] that they don't think they'll get in [to university]. They don't think they're good enough. When [I] look at the kids in Michelle's class and it's like university and the likes of Trinity and UCD, they have them up here and have themselves like down so low. They think the universities are above them like. And I'm forever going like 'No they're not, just because you're from here doesn't mean to say that you're not going to get in anywhere.' It's like college, it's not part of their world. It's kind of normal for them not to go...it's like it's just not part of the culture in [names area].

As this extract suggests, the sense of not being 'good enough' for higher education may be deeply rooted amongst young people from these communities and over-rides attempts on the part of parents and teachers to raise their self-confidence. Another mother, whose daughter had received consistently good reports from school, described her failed attempts to build up her daughter's confidence to apply to college: 'She feels like she's not good enough, that she's not brainy enough, and it's like talking to the wall telling her "you can do it, you can do it". Several other parents also commented on this apparent mismatch between positive feedback from teachers and the way in which young people themselves perceive their abilities. Echoing Irwin and Elley's (2012: 126) research in the UK, these parents' accounts illustrate how, 'in contexts of ongoing disadvantage, the determination and encouragement of parents can hit a brick wall of constraint'.

The findings from teachers were mixed: a few felt that young people were more self-assured than in the past and would not be intimidated by the prospect of going to college, but others argued that a lack of confidence was still one of the main barriers to progression to HE. According to the school completion officer at one Dublin school, for example, attitudes had started to change and young people aspired to go to college, but college was still seen as 'very remote'. She explained that students do not believe they can progress to college, which in turn affects their work levels and aspirations:

> Yeah, they're interested, they want to go but I don't know how focused they are on going because I don't know whether they believe in themselves, that they can do it. So if you've got a child that really believes that they can do this, they're going to put as much energy as possible in to their study to get there. Whereas these kids want it but whether they actually believe in being able to get there is another thing, that might hinder them a little because they might think 'look it's not going to happen for me'.

When asked why young people lacked confidence in relation to HE, teachers and community workers noted the absence of a family/community tradition of going to college so that young people 'can't really relate to it'. This issue is considered in further detail below.

FAMILY HISTORY OF HE AND SUPPORTS FOR EDUCATION IN THE HOME

Parental attitudes and support for education in the home are often posited as key factors in educational outcomes and access to higher education (Kirk et al., 2011). In the current study teachers and community workers consistently reported that parents valued education, particularly as a route to a better future for their children. However, most teachers qualified their answers by suggesting that parents were not always in a position to provide the kinds of supports, encouragement and advice that would improve their children's chances of educational success and progression to HE. They noted that parents in disadvantaged communities would generally have no experience of higher education (many would not have completed secondary school) and as a result would not have the same level of expectations and familiarity with the educational system found in middle-class homes. As one teacher pointed out:

> They [parents] are ambitious for them but sometimes they don't put that together with the work that's required of the students to get to that. There's sometimes a bit of a gap there, in-between ambition and how they encourage them to work at home afterwards. They don't sometimes realise how much is required to get [to college].

Middle-class parents, by contrast, are perceived to be far more driven and controlling when it comes to their children's education and career decisions, for example, one teacher asserted that these parents 'are nearly consumed by the child that's doing their Junior or Leaving Cert., it's all about them for that period of time, the focus is really

get them through and support them as much as we can and the extra grinds and this, that and the other'. There are echoes here of the over-zealous middle-class parents described by Lareau (2003), who prioritise their children's education as a means of safeguarding their class position.

When interpreting these findings it is important to bear in mind previous research that suggests that teachers may adopt a 'deficit' approach in explaining lower achievement amongst working-class students whereby the problem is located 'within students, families, and communities', including parents, who 'neither value nor support their child's education' (Garcia and Guerra, 2004: 150; see also Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998: 460). While some of the comments made by teachers in our research could certainly be construed as representing 'deficit thinking', there were also significant departures. For example, teachers from the six schools were emphatic that parents in these communities valued education. In this respect there was a notable difference with Lynch and O'Riordan's (1998) earlier study in which teachers reported that working-class people 'did not value education'; and that some parents and children, particularly in the Dublin schools, were 'hostile or indifferent to education'. Furthermore, teachers in the current research, particularly those in city schools, highlighted the structural issues that impact on educational outcomes, including poverty and inequality. Rather than 'blaming the parents' in any straightforward sense, unequal access to higher education was generally constructed by teachers as a highly competitive and unequal process in which middle-class parents, 'consumed' by their children's educational success, have an advantage in terms of material resources and familiarity with the educational system.

The issue of familiarity with the higher-education system was also raised during interviews with parents, several of whom spoke of their reliance on the schools and colleges to provide information and advice. As one mother, whose daughter wants to go to university, told us:

> I would be kind of more depending on the college to be giving her the information. I left school when I was just started third year.... No one in our family ever went to college.

There are parallels between our findings and previous studies in the UK and the US that indicate that working-class parents' efforts to support their children's education are hampered by unfamiliarity with college requirements and application procedures (Ball, 2002a; Kirk et al., 2011). The greater reliance of parents and young people from working-class backgrounds on school guidance councillors has also been noted in previous Irish research (see Smyth and Banks, 2012: 265). Information and support needs are likely to be particularly high within DEIS schools where most students will have no family history of third-level education. However, career guidance councillors in the six schools reported that it had become increasingly difficult to balance their guidance role with increases in their teaching loads over the last few years. Under Budget 2012, schools were required to make provision for guidance from the main staffing allocation, whereas previously funding had been ring-fenced. The overall weekly mean practice hours for guidance were estimated to have been reduced by over 25%, with the reduction particularly experienced in one-to-one guidance counselling hours (DES, 2017). Research from the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (2016) suggests that guidance counselling services in DEIS schools were particularly hard hit, with a 30% loss of overall practice hours. In our research, career guidance counsellors reported that the time allocated for guidance has been eroded in recent years, as their teaching workload increased and/or guidance posts were not filled.

LEVELS OF ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT

Previous research suggests that social class is still 'a powerful predictor of educational attainment' and that 'a smaller proportion of young people from lower socio-economic groups achieve the minimum entry qualifications for HE' (Hutchings and Archer, 2001: 70, see also Forsyth and Furlong, 2003). In the current study, teachers (particularly those in urban schools) reported that significant numbers of young people were not achieving the entry points for HE, which they attributed largely to the long-term processes of disadvantage discussed above, including poverty and unequal access to educational and other resources. Furthermore, teachers in the two Dublin schools noted that many of their students work part-time (both in the evening and at weekends), which resulted in less time for homework and exam preparation. Young people from poorer families were reluctant to give up this source of income, even in their final year. In addition, as noted above, parents and teachers reported that a lack of confidence affected aspiration and attainment: many of these young people did not think that they could achieve high grades and get to college, so they did not work towards that goal.

It was beyond the scope of the current study to explore the complex issue of attainment levels in any detail. Nonetheless it is important to raise this issue here as a reminder that the key processes impacting on HE entry occur

much earlier in the educational process (McCoy et al., 2010: 6). As O'Connell et al. (2006) argue, social selectivity in access to higher education is a cumulative process whereby 'retention in the second-level system and performance in the Leaving Certificate are important determinants of entry to higher education, and that retention and performance are in turn heavily influenced by socioeconomic background'.

CAREER ASPIRATIONS

While the different groups of participants in this study valued higher education, there was also a recognition that HE was not the right choice for everyone and that there were other career routes that needed to be recognised and fostered. In focus groups, students pointed out that college 'mightn't be for you', it 'mightn't be your thing', either because you 'hated' study, had 'no interest in college' or wanted a career that did not require HE qualifications. In the student survey, most of those who had decided not to go on to HE indicated that their chosen career did not require a HE qualification (though further education/training was generally expected). This point was reiterated in interviews with teachers and parents, some of whom described their children as having aptitudes and interests (e.g. 'practical', 'hands-on', 'outdoors') that would lead to careers that required vocational training (see chapter 7). In rural schools, some young people were planning on working on the family farm, in which case they were more likely to go to an agricultural college.

EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

The focus of this chapter has been on young people who remain in school up to the senior cycle (5th and 6th year) and who are on course to take the Leaving Certificate Examination. However, for those students who leave school early, progression to third-level education through the Leaving Certificate route is not an option. Figures published by the Department of Education (2016) suggests that young people from disadvantaged areas are more likely to leave school early: nearly 4% (2,427) of pupils enrolled in DEIS schools in 2009/2010 left before enrolling in the final year of the senior cycle. This compares to 2.1% of pupils enrolled in non-DEIS schools.

In the course of our fieldwork we undertook two focus groups with early school leavers who were enrolled in a youth project that provides alternative education for those not in mainstream provision. The first focus group was comprised principally of young people who were born in Ireland, while the second was made up of young migrants from several countries including Poland, Syria, Togo, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The majority of participants in both groups spoke about their experience of secondary school in negative terms. In particular the strict and, in their view, punitive approach taken by teachers and school management towards issues such as uniform and appearance contributed significantly to this. They felt there was an overly strong focus on obeying rules and how the school is represented, rather than on student welfare. Furthermore, participants in the second focus group spoke about feeling judged and discriminated against because of their migrant status. Some felt that they were treated more harshly than students who had been born in Ireland. For example, one young woman reported that she had been 'sent home for piercings and makeup but there were Irish girls with loads of makeup… and they were allowed stay in school but me and my friends were treated differently'. Another young person said that skin colour made 'a big difference to how you are treated'. For those who came to Ireland as teenagers, the experience of learning English had been challenging, particularly as there were few language supports in secondary school and they were expected to complete assignments and take examinations in a language they were still learning. The point was also made that young people who enter Ireland through a supported refugee programme are provided with a significant amount of language and practical support. However, this only applies to a minority of migrant young people: the vast majority face the challenge of mastering the language (both written and verbal) and engaging with the secondary-school system with relatively few supports.

Participants from both focus groups were very clear that since they had left secondary school and enrolled in the programme provided by a youth-work organisation, education had become a far more positive experience for them. This was due to a number of factors, including smaller class sizes ('the group is small so it's easier to learn here than in a big group of 30') and a more effective pedagogical approach: 'It's the different technique they use here – they give you more time and explain things better.'

The aspirations of the young people in terms of future careers and education were quite varied. While some planned to train for skilled occupations (e.g. mechanics, beauticians, hairdressers) others hoped to eventually go on to college

to undertake business studies, teaching and other courses. However, the financial cost and the bureaucracy involved in accessing third-level education were identified as significant barriers. Several of the young people from migrant backgrounds pointed out that the process of applying for grants, such as SUSI or the Back to Education Allowance, could be very complicated, and much depended on the applicant's migration status and whether he/she was from within the EU. While it was beyond the scope of the current study, these issues warrant further investigation in terms of widening access to third-level education. Other barriers to progressing to HE identified by participants in the focus groups included: the financial cost; having caring responsibilities at home; concerns about meeting the academic standards in HE; and anxiety about entering an unfamiliar world, e.g. 'I'd be the first one to go, I want to go but at the same time I'm scared – it's the fear.' These issues were broadly similar to the points raised by the students in the six case-study schools, outlined earlier. In addition, the experience of early school leaving made a few participants question whether they would remain in college – negative experiences of the school system and of 'dropping-out' made them uneasy about the prospect of entering formal education again.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has sought to explore the factors that impact on levels of participation in HE by young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In line with previous research (e.g. Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; McCoy and Byrne, 2011), we found that economic factors continue to have an important influence and arguably have become more significant over the last eight years, in the wake of the 'Great Recession'. While some economic barriers occur at the point of entry (e.g. registration fees, accommodation costs) others reflect structural problems, notably poverty and unequal access to educational resources. Teachers and community workers, particularly in the city schools, noted that there were different levels of disadvantage within disadvantaged communities: some young people lived in conditions of extreme poverty and their families faced an uncertain future, for example due to financial debt, the threat of eviction or of becoming homeless. In these circumstances, education is pushed down the list of priorities, with knock-on effects on school attendance and academic attainment and aspirations.

Some of the key themes to emerge from the research concerned young people's aspirations and orientations towards higher education. Most of the young people in our research said that they would like to go to college and had positive views of what college would entail, including an active social life, greater independence and access to sports and leisure facilities. However, while these young people liked the idea of college life, this was countered by a lack of confidence in their own ability to access and participate fully in third-level education, both on an academic and social level. They displayed none of the assuredness about their future or sense of 'university entitlement' often associated with higher socio-economic groups (see Crozier et al., 2008). Like Ball et al. (2002b: 57) we found that 'doubts, ambivalences and very deliberate decision-making' were features of young people's thinking about HE. Teachers, community workers and a few parents located this lack of confidence in a broader context, including traditionally low levels of family/community participation in HE. Coming from areas that have been designated (and in some cases stigmatised) as 'disadvantaged' also appears to impact on young people's levels of confidence, both in the jobs market and in educational choices. Our findings suggest that there is a need for critical reflection to identify the processes through which young people from lower socio-economic groups come to feel they are 'not good enough' for college. Moreover, rather than individualising this issue, lack of confidence needs to be located within a wider social context 'as constructed through poverty, social inequalities, racial and other forms of discrimination, the lack of respect accorded to working-class people…and the culture and practices of universities themselves' (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003: 600). While current widening participation initiatives are increasing the desire to go to college, they may have a limited impact on these wider issues relating to confidence and access to HE.

The data relating to parental orientations to higher education also provided a somewhat mixed picture. All groups of participants reported that parents in these communities valued education and wanted their children to do well. Nonetheless, teachers also reported that many working-class parents were not familiar with the education system, which was particularly evident in choosing college courses and making applications. Like Kettley and Whitehead (2012: 507) our findings suggest that the issue was 'not parental ambivalence or discouragement…but gaps in parents' practical advice'. The research points to the importance of supporting parents and teachers in providing guidance to students as they progress through the education system. In DEIS schools, with their high numbers of young people from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds, the role of the career guidance counsellor is particularly important in providing information on HE and supporting college applications (HEA, 2015: 17–18). However, as noted above, funding cuts to education resulted in reduced hours for career guidance from 2012 onwards. The 'partial restoration of resources removed in Budget 2012' was announced in 2017 (after the completion of our fieldwork), but it is likely to take some time before all schools address the deficit and bring provision for guidance back to its original level.

CHAPTER 7: PARENTAL ATTITUDES TO FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Parental attitudes and support for education in the home are often posited as key factors in educational outcomes and access to higher education (Kirk et al., 2011). Internationally, there is now a significant body of literature on parents' orientations to their children's education and the role that they play in supporting both formal and informal learning (e.g. Ball, Reay, and David, 2002; Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003; Irwin and Elley, 2011, 2012; Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilsen, and Colvin, 2011; Lareau, 2002, 2003; Reay, 2000, 2005). A recurring theme in the literature is that all parents want to do the best by their children and want their children to do well, 'but how effectively desires translate into outcomes varies depending on where people are positioned within an unequal society' (Irwin and Elley, 2011: 481). Research indicates that while working-class parents value higher education and often have high expectations for their children, their efforts to support them are hampered by unfamiliarity with college requirements, concerns about college affordability and limited awareness of financial-aid opportunities (see Kirk et al., 2011).

RESEARCH WITH PARENTS

The focus of this chapter is on parental expectations and aspirations, and their engagement with their children's education and plans for the future. As part of the current study, we interviewed 25 parents, who were recruited through the case-study schools (see chapter 2). Parents were asked about their children's plans for the future (once they had left school) and what they themselves thought of these plans. The responses, particularly to the second question, were revealing in terms of parental aspirations, the value that they attached to education and their perceptions on what constituted a 'decent future'. As we shall see, there were notable variations in terms of parents' level of engagement in their children's education and decision-making for the future.

Most parents said that their children were likely to go on to post-secondary education, either higher education, further education (the majority), apprenticeships or other training (e.g. for the police force). The option of going straight to work after completing school was mentioned in only a few cases. This was broadly in line with the findings of our research with school students and teachers, who reported that most young people who completed the Leaving Certificate Examination, progress to post-secondary education or training.

The chapter is divided into two main sections. In the first section we present the findings from the interviews with parents who said that their children were likely to go on to higher education; section two presents the findings from participants whose children were planning on pursuing a different pathway – in most cases further education or apprenticeships. In each case we will consider parental reactions to their children's imagined futures and the nature of their engagement in their children's education and decision-making.

PARENTS' ORIENTATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Of the 25 parents interviewed, nine said that they expected their children to go on to higher education: in some cases they also named specific careers and/or subject areas, including teaching, architecture and computer science. These parents expressed feelings of pride and strong approval (e.g. 'I'm delighted,' 'I'm very happy') at their children's future plans. At the same time, there were considerable variations in terms of parents' level of engagement in their children's education and plans for the future. In our analysis below, we distinguish between parents who saw themselves as having played a strategic role in shaping their children's post-secondary choices; and those who appear to have played a supportive but less active role in their children's decision-making. While we have divided parents into these two broad categories, based on the level and nature of their engagement, it should be emphasised that we do not see these as discrete categories, but rather as different points on a spectrum. Moreover, parents can exercise varying levels of involvement in their children's education, depending on the perceived needs and abilities of the individual child.

Parents in Strategic Roles

As noted above, all of those parents with children who wanted to go on to HE were enthusiastic about their plans, but some parents were more proactive than others and appeared to have steered their children in a particular direction. In this respect they exhibited the type of 'strategic orientation' to their children's education described by Irwin and Elley (2011, 2012). These parents told us that they had discussed career options with their children from primary school onwards, advised them on subject choices and attended college open days and information events run by the school so that they would be better equipped to support their children. They advocated 'pushing' children to achieve and had a strong sense of their own role in shaping their children's futures.

Monica was one of the most strategically-oriented parents in the group and exemplifies several of the themes noted above. A strong believer in education as a means of social mobility, she repeatedly mentioned the importance of 'pushing' children to achieve. She herself had no experience of third-level education, having left school at 15 to start work. At the time of the interview Monica was married to a taxi driver and had three sons, the oldest of whom (Brian) wanted to be an architect. It was clear from Monica's account that she not only supported her son in this ambition but saw herself as having played a key role in helping him reach this decision. From an early age Brian excelled in art, particularly drawing. While his mother was clearly proud of his talent and commitment, she was also concerned that he was focusing too much on art and was unsure of what kind of career (if any) it might lead to. Monica recalled conversations in which she impressed upon her son the importance of doing well in other subjects, particularly maths, and the need to plan for the future, in case he 'didn't make it in art'. In addition, she drew on a family connection (her niece's husband is an architect) to encourage her son to consider architecture, a career that would also appeal to his artistic interests. In this respect, Monica displayed an awareness of the value of accessing first-hand knowledge of the HE system and professional careers pathways, to which families from lower socio-economic groups would not normally have access (Ball et al., 2002a). She felt that her son was now 'on the right track' and heading for a career in architecture, though there was little sense of complacency:

> I still will push him. I think parents should push their children. It's not saying it's easy. We know it's hard. I'm not one of these bullies saying, 'Oh you have to do this and you have to do that.' I'll talk to him nicely and say, 'Do you know what…' and I'll present it another way and I'll make it sound nice and he'll go, 'I think you're right,' and it works, it definitely works.

Other strategically-oriented parents provided similar (albeit less detailed) accounts of steering their children towards higher education and graduate careers, though few were able to draw on the family connections that Monica could access. The need to push children was a recurring theme, e.g. 'I'm pushing them towards UCD or Trinity.' Although these self-proclaimed pushy parents were in a minority, they are illustrative of the diversity of orientation to education within the group. Like the students in Reay et al.'s (2009: 1108) research, these parents focused on personal characteristics such as hard work and determination as important to academic success, accepting the 'meritocratic myth' that is often a feature of higher-education discourses (see also Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003).

Parents in Supporting Roles

We turn now to another group of parents, who also expected their children to progress to HE, but where the impetus seems to have come largely from the child, with little or no apparent pushing from their parents. While these parents supported their children's plans to go to college, they spoke about their children's education and career options with a degree of detachment that was quite different to the more strategically-oriented parents described above. For example:

> Oh, I don't mind, it's her choice like. She's the one doing it. She's the one that does the work. She's good at work. She is very determined. If Rachel decides on something, she is going there, she is doing it.

> I just kind of listen to what he [her son] says because I don't know, it's him that's looking into all this.

It was clear from the interviews that this sense of detachment did not indicate a lack of interest on the parents' part, but rather a lack of familiarity with the educational system and how best to help their children navigate their way through it. Moreover, as the second comment above illustrates, some parents felt that young people themselves (with support from the school) were able to source information and make decisions about third-level education, with

parents playing a fairly limited supporting role. Anne, for example, has a 15-year-old daughter whom she described as a 'self-starter' who 'loved school', was 'passionate about her work' and wanted to become a secondary-school teacher. Anne was very proud of her daughter's academic success and keen to support her ambition to go to college, for example, by providing 'bed and board' for the four years (or more) that her daughter would be in college. However, Anne felt ill-equipped to support her daughter in other ways, particularly in terms of providing advice on HE and on different educational options, as neither she nor any of her family had attended college:

> I would be kind of more depending on the college to be giving her the information. I left school when I was, I was just started third year. My mother [had a serious illness] so basically, I just had to leave and stay at home to clean and cook. No one in our family ever went to college.

Very similar points were made in other interviews, as the following extract illustrates:

> **Carol**: My father died when we were all young and there was seven of us and my mother had to rear us all on her own and, do you know, that was hard times like then. And there was no money to go to college. And do you know when they're questioning you about college, I didn't go to college, neither did my husband…She [her daughter] would come home from school and she'd be saying, 'If I went to college to do this, what would I have to do?' and I mean I don't know, I didn't go to college, I'm trying to find bits of information.
> **Jenny:** Yeah, but they know themselves, Carol, if they look it up.
> **Carol:** And then she goes on [the computer] and she checks it out.
> **Jenny:** They know, yeah, they know, they'd be telling you like…I just think they know, they're smarter, this generation are way smarter than what we were.

In the example above, Carol feels at a disadvantage in terms of providing information and advice about college because she had no experience herself. However, the second parent (Jenny) does not regard this as problematic because young people can find this information themselves and are better equipped to do so than their parents. Our findings here are reminiscent of Ball et al. (2002a: 337) who note that in households where parents did not attend college themselves, 'the process of information gathering and choice are mostly left to the student'. By contrast, middle-class parents are often directly involved in choice-making in relation to HE. Similarly, Irwin and Elley (2012: 122) found that some parents in intermediate or working-class circumstances 'felt they had a relatively limited influence over their children's futures, and often conceded greater autonomy to their children than did any of the middle-class parents'.

Parental Perspectives on the Value of Higher Education

All of the parents described above valued education and strongly supported their children's aspirations to go on to higher education. The benefits of higher education were discussed primarily in instrumental terms, as a route to securing a 'good' job, although a few participants also noted that their children would enjoy meeting young people with similar interests and aspirations. In explaining why they thought education was important, parents frequently drew on their own life experience. Most of this group had left school early, usually to start work, and now looked back with a degree of regret for what they felt they had missed. These parents saw education (particularly HE) as a means of giving their children the opportunities that they had never had, as the following comments illustrate:

> [I told my son] I want you to be starting your life in a good job, you're stable, and then move on with your life. 'Cos I never got the education. I left school at a very young age. I was from a family of six, the eldest girl, we had no money at the time. I left school, I got a job and I remember I was 15 years old working in a restaurant.

> I am a hundred per cent interested in my child's education because I left school early myself and it's obvious now [my daughter] won't be kind of going down the route that I did. I had a child very young I was pregnant when I was seventeen and I had him when I was eighteen. So I am interested very much in her education… She wants to go to college and get a degree.

Similarly, another mother, who had moved to Ireland from Africa, saw education as a means to a better life for her daughters. This outlook was shared by other members of her community, which she believed helped to keep young people motivated:

> And some of the ones from my background will want their children to [progress to HE]. Because to us this is an opportunity to give our children a better life. Better opportunities, so we kind of push our children to grasp the opportunity, to be able to have their third level. It really sets them up for life. So they are always surrounded by people that think that way.

It was also clear from the interviews that parents believed that education had become more important over time. They noted that even low-skilled jobs now required a Leaving Certificate, whereas in the past few or no formal qualifications would have been necessary. To achieve any kind of upward mobility, third-level education was seen as important. Indeed, one parent commented that we are now reaching the stage where young people will need a degree to work in a shop (a point also made by community workers). Although these remarks were made humorously, they nonetheless point to underlying concerns about 'credential inflation', whereby young people are having to stay in formal education for longer to compete for jobs.

Parents' Concerns about Access to Higher Education

When asked if they had any concerns or could foresee any barriers to their children progressing to HE, the main issues (not surprisingly) related to financial costs and lack of familiarity with the student-grant application procedures. Parents voiced a number of concerns about eligibility and whether the student grant would be sufficient to cover all costs. Some parents also worried that the prohibitive costs of going to college might have a negative impact on their children's aspirations. They were mindful of passing on their own concerns to their children, as the following comments illustrate:

> I'm a single parent myself, so even though I'm working, I won't be able to afford the major fees by myself. I know there is grants there but I worry... I am working but I'm not making that much. I'm sitting back thinking 'Oh my God, how am I going to do this?' So that would be a worry and it makes him [her son] worry. He often said to me 'How are we going to do it?' So he worries about it too.

The challenges described by this mother are reminiscent of the 'doubts, ambivalences and very deliberate decision-making' of working-class and ethnic-minority families in relation to HE, identified in Ball et al's (2002b: 57) research. Even amongst the strategically-oriented parents there was little sense of complacency: children needed to be pushed and careful plans had to be put in place, particularly around the affordability of college. One mother, for example, described how location and public-transport routes were key factors when she and her daughters discussed possible universities. Certain colleges were shortlisted, while others were more or less ruled out, on the basis of bus routes. In nearly all cases (with the exception of students in rural locations) parents said that their children would attend a college that was within a commutable distance in order to continue living at home and save on accommodation costs. Therefore, financial considerations not only influenced decisions about whether to go to college, but also placed restrictions on where young people could study and, in some instances, what they could study.

PARENTAL ORIENTATIONS TO FURTHER EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING

We turn now to another group of parents who reported that their children were planning to enrol in further-education courses (including childcare, hairdressing, animal husbandry), start an apprenticeship or (in one instance) join the police force after finishing school. A few said that their children wanted to start work straight from school or were still undecided. Like the parents described above, this group of parents valued education and wanted their children to progress further in the educational system than they themselves had done. At the very least, they wanted their children to complete the Leaving Certificate Examination and then go on to further education or other training. Again, parental attitudes to education were often grounded in the belief that educational qualifications had become more important across all employment sectors, including manual and non-manual occupations. There are parallels here with Irwin and Elley's (2011: 484) research with working-class parents in the UK, the majority of whom reported that education was more important now than in the past. The authors attribute this to changes over recent decades, 'whereby qualifications have overtaken work-based routes to successful working-class employment'.

When asked for their views on their child's plans for the future, the responses were largely positive. For example, one father – whose son was hoping to join the police force – said that he was 'delighted with it, it's a great profession, its brilliant, like it would be a great job'. Similarly, another parent told us that she was 'delighted' that her son had chosen to do an apprenticeship in carpentry because 'it's a good job…my cousin is a carpenter and he does well'. Her older son had already started an apprenticeship that combined study and on-the-job training. Like Irwin and Elley (2012: 119), we found that parents often saw a skilled manual trade as a positive aspiration for sons. At the same time this was tempered by an awareness of the precarity of the construction industry, on which these trades rely. Parents in one rural school, for example, reflected on the local impact of the downturn in the construction industry in Ireland from 2008, but they were cautiously optimistic that the economic situation was improving and that new jobs were opening up for young people. In the following extract, one participant speaks quite positively about her nephew's decision to forgo college and take up an apprenticeship instead:

> My nephew, he was very good in school here like, he did his Leaving Cert. and all, but before the Leaving Cert., these people came to speak to them [about apprenticeships for electricians]. My nephew took the apprenticeship and he's in his second year now…and he loves it. And all along leading up to it he was going to Cork like, to college, but it just happened that way and he took it, himself and another boy. And he just went and he's happy out. And his friends from school, the group he was with, they all went to college.

A recurring theme in the interviews with this group of parents was that their children had made the right choice, given their particular interests and abilities. Several parents noted, for example, that their daughters did not want to work in offices and would be happier in more 'hands-on' occupations such as childcare. While it was clear from the interviews that parents had discussed possible futures with their children, they emphasised that ultimately it was up to the child themselves (within certain limits) to make decisions on their future. Several parents explicitly rejected the idea of pushing their children in a particular direction as this was seen as ineffective ('I don't go on or anything as it gets boring and you're wasting your time'); puts young people under undue pressure; and could lead to careers in which they would not be happy. Michael, whose son wants to join the Gardaí, was particularly emphatic on this point:

> We haven't forced it upon him, he came up with this idea himself. We are aware of parents pushing kids to do certain jobs because they are financially…they would be financially better off but my son came up with this himself. Some parents would, I've heard of parents pushing their kids to be doctors and two years in college and they realise it's not for them. We wouldn't push him in just for financial reasons.

Similarly, another participant suggested that parents ultimately have limited influence over their children and the best they can do is support them:

> I leave him make the decision and all I can do as a parent is support his decision. Because it doesn't matter if I say, 'No you are not to do that,' and he says he is going to do it. Just the same as when we were young and people were telling us what to do, we would do it anyway. So it's best if we just leave him off and support him along the way, anyway that I can.

While affording their children a good deal of agency, there were some options that parents ruled out in the strongest terms, including 'hanging around the house', 'signing on', or going to work in 'dead-end' jobs (e.g. shop assistant). Where tensions arose it was usually when parents felt children were not putting in enough effort at school or had no particular plans for the future and so were at risk of drifting into low-paid, precarious jobs or unemployment.

In a few cases, parents felt that their children could have progressed to higher education had they worked harder or had more self-confidence. For example, Rosemary, whose older son was a final-year student at an institute of technology (IoT), described her failed attempts to build up her daughter's confidence to follow in his footsteps. Some participants also spoke of how universities are still seen as remote and intimidating by young people in their community, whereas the local colleges of further education are viewed as 'not as scary' and 'a lot more approachable'.

CONCLUSION

The interviews with parents provided an insight into the experiences of women (and one man) who grew up in working-class communities at a time when the prospects of going on to higher education were virtually non-existent. Indeed, most of these parents did not complete secondary school, but left at 15 or 16 to start work. There was nothing unusual about their experience: leaving early appeared to be the norm within these communities ('everybody was leaving'). These parents spoke of 'hard times' when there was 'no money to go to college' and 'no choice' other than to start work. Moreover, there appeared to be few structures in place to promote school completion and progression to third-level education. In one paired interview, for example, participants spoke of the university open days that their children had attended, adding that 'we had nothing like that'. Despite their own limited experience of formal education, these parents valued education and wanted their children to progress further than they themselves had done. One of the teachers in our research made the point that there had been a generational change in young people's educational aspirations and expectations. Much the same could be said of their parents. Furthermore, there was a considerable level of agreement amongst the other participants in the study – teachers, community workers and young people – that parents in disadvantaged communities valued education and would be supportive of their children if they wanted to go on to college. There was a notable difference with Lynch and O'Riordan's (1998) earlier study in which teachers reported that working-class people 'did not value education' and that some parents and children, particularly in the Dublin schools, were 'hostile or indifferent to education'. In line with Kettley and Whitehead's (2012) research, we found little evidence of parental attitudes to HE that could be characterised as ambivalent or negative.

In the course of the interviews a number of issues were raised that shed light on parental orientations to education and why these have changed over time. Firstly, there was a perception that the jobs market in Ireland had altered significantly over the last 20 years and that the level of educational qualifications required for all jobs had increased. In order for their children to not be 'left behind' in a competitive jobs market, parents believed that they had to remain in the educational system for longer. Further education and training were valued, while higher education was seen as a route to more significant social mobility. Secondly, parents noted that there are now more educational opportunities for young people, which has contributed to raising expectations. Parents praised the schools for their efforts to encourage children to stay in school and then go on to further or higher education. They also commented favourably on the various access initiatives run by HE institutions (e.g. open days) that had helped to raise awareness and aspirations amongst young people. There was a sense that HE is being considered as an option by families in disadvantaged communities in a way that it was not in the past. Finally, parents' own biographical experience of leaving school early shaped their orientation to their children's education and future careers. Several parents felt that they had 'missed out' and wanted their own children to have the opportunities that they themselves had not.

Like Irwin and Elley (2011, 2012), our research found that while all parents were concerned about their children's education and future career prospects, this was expressed in different ways and with varying levels of confidence. At one end of the spectrum were parents, like Monica, who took a highly-strategic role in planning her son's education and future career. More typical were those parents (like Anne) who, while providing support and encouragement, seemed to play a less active role, largely because of their lack of familiarity with the educational system. Parents tended to rely on teachers and young people themselves to source information on HE and make course choices. In these cases, the aspirations and strong academic performance of their children appear to have raised parental expectations, a finding that resonates with previous studies (Goldenberg, 2001; Mistry et al., 2009). Our research points to the need to make information on post-secondary options more accessible to parents, so that they feel confident in providing guidance to young people as they progress through the education system. Our research also highlights one area where parents in disadvantaged areas provide a particularly important support to their children, without which they would be less likely to progress to HE, and this is in the provision of accommodation during their years in college. Young people from these communities generally select institutions that are within a commutable distance of home in order to save on accommodation and living expenses. The practical role that parents – many of whom are on very limited means – play in enabling young people from disadvantaged communities to progress to HE is often overlooked.

Most parents with children who were going on to further education were broadly satisfied with their decision, though again this varied from those who were 'delighted', to those who, while accepting their child's decision, felt that they could have aimed higher. Where parents voiced concern, it was that their children might leave school with no plans for the future and drift into unemployment or low-paid, "dead-end" jobs. It is easy to see why parents, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, might feel anxious in the current economic climate. Over the last ten years Ireland (like a number of other European countries) has seen record levels of youth unemployment and cuts

in social-welfare benefits for young people. According to data from the Economic and Social Research Institute, the importance of having a Leaving Certificate, or higher level of education, in reducing the risk of a young person becoming unemployed has increased since the economic crisis (Kelly et al., 2015). Employment prospects for young people without qualifications are increasingly precarious and this was reflected in our interviews. While parents were certainly hopeful that their children would move up the socio-economic ladder, they were also concerned about the possibility that – without a Leaving Certificate and additional qualifications – they could slip further down.

CHAPTER 8: EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE IN THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

Travellers are one of the most under-represented groups in higher education in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills, 2006; Higher Education Authority, 2015). Watson et al. (2017: 29) in an Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) study, entitled A Social Portrait of Travellers in Ireland, reported that only 1% of Travellers possess a degree, compared with 30% of non-Travellers. As part of the current project, exploratory research was carried out in relation to access to higher education for young people from the Traveller community. Interviews were carried out with representatives from a Traveller Health and Community project, a Third Level Traveller Access Programme and a youth-work organisation that works with Travellers who return to education. The findings suggest that poverty and limited expectations on the part of schools impact on educational outcomes and progression rates for Traveller children. At the same time, there were indicators that young Travellers are staying on in school longer and that some are returning to education as adults. The main points raised in the interviews are outlined below.

POVERTY AND EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

According to a representative from one Traveller Health and Community Development Project (henceforth THCDP), poverty represents one of the main barriers to educational progression amongst young people from the Traveller community. Overcrowded accommodation and a lack of resources have a significant impact on education, particularly when combined with other challenges:

> Poverty sets an awful lot of people in Ireland back, not just Traveller children, from participating, especially if you have other issues. So you can overcome one issue at a time. So if it's poverty, you can overcome that. If it's racism, maybe you can overcome that. If you are a child who has to overcome poverty, lack of space, discrimination – if you are a child that has to overcome all of that, that's where it becomes difficult. And this is my analysis of what's happening with Traveller children. They are dealing with more than one issue. And it's too much for one person's shoulders.

She went on to point out that the children of more affluent parents were able to afford a range of extra-curriculum activities (e.g. music lessons), which give them an added advantage within the education system. The emphasis on extra-curriculum activities and supports was seen as a significant change from the past – 'when it was enough to just go to school' – and one that further disadvantages the poorest families.

It was noted that there were variations in income and wealth levels within the Traveller community, and some young people would have the option of becoming self-employed with the help of their family. However, young people from poorer Traveller families would not have the same kinds of opportunities:

> They [parents] want the best outcomes for their children. We have the same aspirations for our children as anyone else has…So for us if a young person expresses an interest in enterprise and self-employment and they come from a family that can support that…we would encourage them to go that route. But the worrying case would be where a child comes from a place from which they have little opportunity to support themselves down the road, then we see education as being pivotal for lifting those children and our community out of poverty.

A number of the points raised in our research in relation to poverty and overcrowding are borne out by previous research and official figures. Although a relatively small group in Ireland, accounting for less than 1 % of the population, Travellers have been identified 'as experiencing extreme disadvantage in terms of education, employment, housing, health and in facing exceptionally strong levels of prejudice' (Watson et al., 2017: 1; see also Department of Justice and Equality, 2017). The 2016 Census also revealed that Travellers were more than three times as likely to live in multiple-family households, compared with the general population. Watson et al. (2017: 44–5) noted that 30% of Travellers lived in accommodation with three rooms or less, compared with 6% of non-Travellers.

Furthermore, 56% of Travellers live in overcrowded accommodation, compared with 6% of the non-Traveller population. Overcrowding was more common amongst children under 15 years of age, which has implications for school performance. These statistics are significant social indicators of extreme deprivation amongst the Irish Traveller population.

DISCRIMINATION AND MISTRUST OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Participants noted that young Travellers continue to face discrimination and exclusion within the education system. Moveover, there is a historic mistrust of the educational system amongst some sections of the Traveller community. It was noted that many parents and grandparents had a negative experience of schooling, which continues to have an impact on Traveller engagement with education:

> Their [parents'] experience will taint their children's experience because they are afraid their child is going to undergo the same bullying and segregation and ill-treatment. I personally had a good experience of education, but I was put into segregated education at the start until my mother stopped it. But other Travellers have had horrific experiences of school... So you have a whole host of background as to why Travellers aren't thriving in school. That's not to say that every Traveller isn't thriving in school but the feeling in the county is that parents are very nervous of the education system.
>
> THCDP representative

One of the outcomes of this mistrust of the education system is that parents from the Traveller community may not have the confidence to engage with teachers or raise issues with the school, for example, if they think their child needs additional support. The loss of services over the last ten years, including the Visiting Teacher for Travellers, has further weakened the channels of communication between home and school:

> The loss of the Visiting Teacher and other resources has had a massive negative effect on Traveller education in [this area]...The Visiting Teacher for Travellers was like an ambassador and an advocate for the children in the school and with the parents as well.

Previous research has highlighted the negative experiences of Travellers in formal education, including bullying, social exclusion and low expectations on the part of teachers (see for example, AITHS, 2010; Biggart et al., 2013; Knipe et al., 2005; Padfield and Cameron, 2009). Existing evidence also suggests that Travellers do not associate education with social mobility because of the high level of discrimination they face when seeking employment (Knipe et al., 2005).

LIMITED EXPECTATIONS FROM SCHOOLS

The challenges that young Travellers face in primary and secondary education were also raised in interviews with representatives from a Third Level Traveller Access Programme. It was noted that some schools have lower expectations in terms of academic outcomes and attendance, and a different set of standards and rules appeared to apply to Traveller children. Keeping Travellers in school was seen as an end in itself ('the box is ticked'), with little reference to how well these students were achieving. One interviewee noted that from primary school onwards there was a sense that 'You [Travellers] are not going to go anywhere so what are we wasting our time with you for?' By the time these young people reach 6th year, they are not achieving the grades that would enable them to go on to college. During one school visit, the Access Officer recalled meeting a young person who had reached 5th year without being able to read or write. Students like this appeared to be 'going through the system' without concerns being raised about levels of attainment:

> I think there's low expectations there for Travellers and it's happening in primary school. So if you're given a bad report from primary school, what makes the teacher in secondary have any interest in you?

She went on to argue that in order to increase the numbers of Travellers progressing to higher education, policy makers and educators first need to address failures within the primary- and secondary-school system. She acknowledged that there was an 'issue with attendance' but argued that schools needed to think about why it was that Traveller children did not want to go to school. Rather than simply pointing to 'Traveller culture', there needs to be a greater reflection on the nature of the education system.

Representatives from a youth-work organisation, which works with Traveller young people in Youthreach and other programmes, also reported that while Traveller young people were staying on in education longer, they were leaving school with poor examination results. Therefore, it was important to look not only at how long Traveller young people remain in education, but also at educational outcomes. Figures suggesting that Travellers are staying on longer in education may disguise the fact that they are leaving with few if any qualifications.

WAYS FORWARD

Looking to the future, interviewees reported that Traveller education needs dedicated supports, which should be developed in conjunction with the Traveller community and young people themselves. As one participant pointed out:

> We need role-modelling, investment, we need investment in Traveller education. We need supports and those supports need to be developed in conjunction with Traveller parents, the Traveller community and Traveller organisations, this is pivotal to their success, and in conjunction with young people. The young people's voice needs to be heard.

It was noted that interventions to raise educational standards need to begin from primary school onwards. Initiatives that target young people in senior-cycle year are likely to have limited impact because some young people have already left school or fallen behind other classmates. Furthermore, a complete re-evaluation of educational supports is needed in order to identify the most effective means of raising educational standards:

> Nearly all the resources invested in Traveller education were taken away and we need those resources reinstated and used properly, not how they were used before. We need a complete SWOT analysis, if you like, of Traveller education. And we need all the supports analysed to see what exactly has been the benefit of the outcomes for Traveller young people in education.

Representatives from the youthwork organisation also argued that for some young people, not just those in the Traveller community, the current schooling system was 'not working' and that a complete re-evaluation of how we educate children is necessary to bring about real change. In the case of the examination system, for example, too much emphasis continues to be placed on one final set of examinations, rather than ongoing assessment.

Interviewees emphasised the importance of role models and 'success stories' as a way of encouraging young Travellers to stay on in school and progress to higher education:

> And also being able to see the future, the benefits of education. It's important for our children to have supports and role models from an early age, like pathways from an early age. Even from primary school, to start visualising their futures because by the time they get to secondary school, a lot of the literacy and numeracy support they need, while it's never too late to intervene, it's a bit late then.

> But we need success stories coming out of the education system to encourage young people to stay in there, you know. We want to see them becoming doctors, we want to see them becoming nurses. We want to see them becoming, I don't know, teachers, classroom assistants, shop keepers. You know, if that's what they want for themselves. But we need to see them being successful and coming through. To have a currency for them.

However, interviewees also noted that young people who progress to higher education and graduate careers may not disclose their Traveller identity because of concerns around discrimination. Therefore, it was difficult for role models to emerge. As we saw in chapter 6, the young Traveller student in university (Mary) did not tell any of her fellow students that she was from the Traveller community, because she had experienced discrimination in the past. Her family objected to her participation in HE on the grounds that she was likely to face discrimination (both in college and in middle-class workplaces) and lose her Traveller identity. Their reactions, and Mary's reluctance to disclose her identity to fellow students, need to be understood in light of previous research on the negative experiences of Travellers in formal education (for example, AITHS, 2010; Biggart et al., 2013; Knipe et al., 2005; Padfield and Cameron, 2009). As a result, some Travellers may 'deny their identity' in order to fit in at school or find work (AITHS, 2010: 120). In light of previous research, it would appear that Mary's decision to withhold her Traveller identity is not unique and that her family's misgivings reflect a wider distrust in the processes and outcomes of formal education amongst the Traveller community. It was beyond the scope of the current research to examine these issues in detail,

but our findings add to the existing literature on the need to foster more inclusive environments at all levels of the education system.

CHANGING ATTITUDES TO EDUCATION

While our interviews highlighted the challenges that young people in the Traveller community face within the education system, several participants also noted that attitudes to education are changing gradually. Youth workers reported that young people were staying on longer in the school system, relative to their parents and grandparents:

> So if I look at the young people that I worked with, in the early nineties, their parents would have absolutely, have never really gone to school at all. And they may have gone a certain way, not even probably to Junior Cert., they would've left, maybe after primary. Very poor literacy and numeracy. They're now parents themselves. And they want their children to complete education. Now, they might limp through a Leaving Cert. But you can be sure then when those young people have children, they will be pushing them through [the education system]. So, generationally it is changing, bit by bit.

There were a number of reasons for changing attitudes towards, and engagement with, education. Youth workers noted that some mothers, who left school early, had returned to education as adults. This experience meant that they were better able to support their children's education and were more aware of the importance of education. Other interviewees also reported that adult Travellers, particularly women, were returning to education, in part to support their children: 'Women are more confident, women are more eager to learn now for their children.'

CONCLUDING POINTS

The need to address the under-representation of Travellers in HE has gained increased recognition in recent years. For instance, the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019 (HEA, 2015) set the first national target for increasing the participation in HE by people from the Traveller community. The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, 2017–2021 (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017) laid out plans for increasing participation in HE, including the development by the higher-education sector of a network of peer support and mentoring for Travellers and Roma in third-level education. At the same time, it is widely acknowledged that problems with access do not only arise at the point of entry to third-level education. Because of low school-completion rates, work with primary and second level forms a crucial part of increasing access (HEA, 2008). The findings of the current research add further weight to this argument but also indicate that wider issues – notably poverty amongst the Traveller community – need to be addressed to bring about long-term change.

CHAPTER 9: **CONCLUSION**

Social mobility is about 'ensuring that every citizen has the opportunity to build a good life for themselves regardless of their family background. In a socially mobile society, every individual has a fair chance of reaching their potential' (UK Commission on Social Mobility 2017: 2). Education is widely viewed as the key to unlocking a better future for all citizens than previous generations. Merit provides the value base that underpins social mobility. However, it has been argued that the social-mobility aspiration ignores the influence of the class system, which is reproduced at all levels of the education system – primary, secondary and tertiary – through differences in cultural capital, intergenerational wealth transmission and income inequalities (Courtois, 2015). In Ireland, the evidence indicates that while there has been considerable progress in achieving equal opportunities (e.g. gender representation), some groups (working-class communities, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities) remain seriously under-represented. The dynamics of access to higher education in Ireland constitutes a microcosm of this phenomenon. As the Higher Education Authority (2014: 7) observes: 'An uncomfortable and sobering fact is that deep reservoirs of educational disadvantage mirroring in large part economic disadvantage, are also part of the Irish higher education story.'

This study set out to explore continuing inequalities in access to higher education based on socio-economic status. Our research suggests that lower rates of participation are not due to lack of aspiration on the part of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, but the product of a complex set of barriers to higher education. In the concluding chapter we synthesise and discuss some of the main findings to emerge from the research.

ORIENTATIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: CHANGING ASPIRATIONS AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

From a widening-participation perspective, there were some very positive findings from our research, particularly in relation to young people's interest and orientation towards higher education. For example, in our survey with senior-cycle students, a total of 66% of respondents said that they wanted to progress to higher education. These findings were corroborated during interviews, with teachers reporting that most students who complete their Leaving Certificate Examination aspire to go on to further education or higher education. Very few young people who complete secondary education now go straight from school to the workplace. Several teachers spoke of an intergenerational change, in terms of attitudes towards third-level education. Students' positive views on what college might be like were evident in the focus-group discussions. Participants identified a range of positive experiential and social aspects of attending college. These included greater independence, being able to study a subject that interests you, meeting new people, a vibrant social life and access to various leisure pursuits. Young people in our study saw the value of higher education, particularly in terms of getting a good job and having a better standard of living than their parents. Changes in the jobs market over the last ten years had also had an impact. During the economic boom (Celtic Tiger, 1997–2008) young people were able to get jobs straight after school, particularly in the construction sector. However, the number of skilled and low-skilled jobs fell drastically during the recession of 2008 to 2013, the effects are still being experienced by the population through the imposition of austerity policies (Powell, 2017: 253–64).

SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

While the numbers of young people aspiring to go to college have increased, the reality is that a significantly lower proportion are likely to get there. The research has identified significant barriers to access to higher education, some of which are located within the educational system itself, while others relate to much wider social issues, notably poverty and sub-standard housing. The research suggests that the cost of higher education continues to be a concern. Teachers and community groups reported that most families in disadvantaged communities would not be able to afford the costs of higher education, consequently the student-grants system was seen as key to enabling young people to progress. However, interviews with parents suggest that reliance on a grant presented its

own challenges: they were concerned, for example, that their children might not qualify for the full grant or that the grant would not cover all costs. Moreover, while receiving a grant might enable young people to progress to higher education, it was also seen as placing restrictions on where students went to college and shaping their experience of college life. In the city schools, potential applicants planned to enrol in a local university or institute of technology so that they could live at home, thereby saving on the costs of accommodation, which, it was felt, would not be adequately covered by the grant.

A recurring theme in the interviews with teachers was that middle-class students have a competitive advantage over their working-class peers, as they can afford additional educational resources and services, notably grinds (private tuition) and expensive grind schools. In a major Economic and Social Research Institute study, it was revealed that half of Leaving Certificate students were accessing private tuition in the form of grinds (Smyth et al., 2009). Manifestly, this private-market system further disadvantages students from poorer families. According to one head teacher, the Irish educational system is being driven by 'market forces' in which students compete to get the points for entry to college. Grind schools and grind courses have developed as a response to the points system, conferring advantage on those who can afford to avail of private markets, further exacerbating the existing inequalities within the educational system. It calls into question the framing of the Leaving Certificate as an objective test based on individual merit.

STRUCTURAL POVERTY AND AUSTERITY

Unequal access to higher education needs to be viewed within a wider social and economic context. Guy Standing (2011) has argued that globalisation has created a new denizen class, which he calls 'the Precariat'. At local level precariousness has become the new normal on many socially-deprived housing estates. According to the Central Statistics Office (2015) almost half the Irish population would be 'at risk' of poverty, if it were not for social transfers. Dukelow and Considine (2017: 202), drawing upon CSO–EU SILC data sets, have observed that children in particular are more vulnerable to consistent poverty. The Department of Social Protection (2015) in its Social Inclusion Monitor estimated 13.2% of the population experienced food poverty in 2013, many of them children.

Our findings indicate that structural poverty and austerity policies constitute significant influences in shaping educational access. While all of the DEIS areas in our research were categorised as 'underprivileged', head teachers and community workers noted that there were considerable variations between different estates and households, with some young people living in conditions of extreme poverty and insecurity. The poorest areas were particularly hard hit by the recession that unfolded from 2008 onwards, which led to rising levels of unemployment, austerity and welfare cuts. Interviews with teachers and youth and community workers confirmed that poverty, including food poverty, seriously impacted on some students' educational participation and progress. Moreover, the stresses associated with poverty (e.g. threats of eviction, debt) had a knock-on effect on the mental and physical health of both parents and children, which in turn impacted on school attendance, academic performance and aspiration. Teachers and youth/community workers consistently reported that when families were struggling 'to make ends meet', education was inevitably pushed further down the list of priorities. As some parents struggled to cope, children had to take on additional responsibilities within the home, particularly the care of younger siblings, which further affected attendance and performance.

SOCIAL CLASS AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Teachers reported that while parents want the best for their children and want them to progress to higher education, they do not always provide the supports and advice that would enable them to get there. This may be due to the fact that they themselves left school very early to start work and so are unfamiliar with the education system. A frequent example given by career guidance teachers is that they have to fill out the CAO forms with young people, because parents would lack confidence around this, whereas in middle-class homes the form would be completed at home, with parents. Interviews with parents also suggest that while they want to support their children to progress to higher education, they often felt ill-equipped to do so.

While most students in the six schools aspired to go on to higher education and tended to have a positive view of college life, they also experienced 'fear of the unknown', especially if they were the first generation or first in their family to go to college. They were particularly concerned about social isolation in a very large and impersonal

environment. In some instances, lack of confidence was linked to perceptions about the area young people come from. The stigma associated with particular areas was also raised by teachers and parents as undermining young people's confidence. The participants' comments on the significance of place resonate with the notion of 'territorial stigmatisation', whereby 'urban dwellers at the bottom of the class structure are discredited and devalued not simply because of their poverty, class position, ethnoracial origin, or religious affiliation, but because of the places with which they are associated' (Slater, 2017: 120; see also Wacquant, 2014). Crossley (2017: 14) argues that territorial stigmatization is linked to the processes of 'othering' and 'social discredit', which reduce the residents of poorer areas to the status of a homogenous 'underclass'.

PROMOTING ACCESS

Access schemes (open days, Easter/summer camps etc.) have helped to break down some of the barriers to higher education. The Higher Education Access Route is particularly important in providing places on reduced points and extra college support to school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. When asked 'what helped' when they first entered university, the students in our research spoke mainly of the targeted orientation events and one-to-one supports provided through the HEAR programme. Almost all participants said that they had found the three-day orientation, run as part of the HEAR programme, to be particularly helpful and that it was through this event that they initially got to know people.

In line with previous studies (see Baker et al., 2014), our research points to the importance of supporting parents and teachers in providing guidance to students as they progress through the education system. In DEIS schools, with their high numbers of young people from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds, the role of the career guidance counsellor is particularly important in providing information on HE and supporting college applications (HEA, 2015: 17–18). However, funding cuts to education, which were part of wider austerity measures during the recession, resulted in reduced hours for career guidance from 2012 onwards. Under Budget 2012, schools were required to make provision for guidance from the main staffing allocation, whereas previously funding had been ring-fenced. Research from the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (2016) suggests that guidance counselling services in DEIS schools were particularly hard hit, with a 30% loss of overall practice hours. In our research, teachers in all six schools reported that the time allocated for guidance has been reduced in recent years, as their teaching workload increased and/or guidance posts were not filled. Department of Education and Skills Circular 0012/2017 (published after the completion of our fieldwork) announced the 'partial restoration of resources removed in Budget 2012'. While this restoration was welcomed by the Institute for Guidance Counsellors (2017), it was noted that it will take time to bring provision for guidance back to its original level.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Higher education has expanded in Ireland over recent decades, but this growth has not been accompanied by equality of access for young people from lower socio-economic groups. The research evidence indicates that this is not due to a lack of interest on the part of these young people, but the product of complex and interconnected barriers to HE. These include not only barriers at the point of entry, but also more long-term structural factors, relating to poverty and inequality. Our findings also suggests that there is a need for critical reflection to identify the processes through which some young people from working-class backgrounds come to feel they are 'not good enough' for higher education. Moreover, rather than individualising the issue, lack of confidence needs to be located within a wider social context as constructed through social inequality and territorial stigmatisation.

[4] A Department of Education and Skills (2017) circular reported that the overall weekly mean practice hours for guidance were estimated to have been reduced by over 25%, with the reduction particularly experienced in one-to-one guidance counselling hours.

REFERENCES

Adnett, N. (2006) 'Student Finance and Widening Participation in the British Isles: Common Problems, Different Solutions', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 60(4): 296–311.

All Ireland Traveller Health Study (AITHS) (2010) Dublin: University College Dublin.

Archer, L., Hollingworth, S. and Halsall, A. (2007) '"University's not for me – I'm a Nike Person": urban, working-class young people's negotiations of "style", identity and educational engagement', *Sociology*, 41(2): 219–37.

Archer, L. and Yamashita, H. (2003) *'"Knowing their limits"? Identities, inequalities and inner city school leavers' post-16 aspirations'*, *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(1): 53–69.

Aries, E. and Seider, M. (2005) 'The Interactive Relationship Between Class Identity and the College Experience: The Case of Lower Income Students', *Qualitative Sociology* 28(4): 419–43.

Baker, W., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E. and Taggart, B. (2014) 'Aspirations, education and inequality in England: insights from the Effective Provision of Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education project', *Oxford Review of Education,* 40(5): 525–42.

Ball, S., Davies, J., David, M. and Reay, D. (2002b) '"Classification" and "judgement": social class and the "cognitive structures" of choice in Higher Education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23(1): 51–72.

Ball, S., Reay, D. and David, M. (2002a) '"Ethnic choosing": minority ethnic students, social class and higher education choice', *Race, Ethnicity and Educatio*n, 5(4): 333–57.

Biggart, A., O'Hare, L. and Connolly, P. (2013) 'A Need to Belong? The Prevalence of Experiences of Belonging and Exclusion in School among Minority Ethnic Children Living in the "White Hinterlands"', *Irish Educational Studies*, 32(2): 179–95.

Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J. (1990) *Reproduction in Education*, Society and Culture. London: Sage.

Bradley, J. and Miller, A. (2010) 'Widening participation in higher education: constructions of "going to university"', *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 26(4): 401–13.

Buckingham, D. and Scanlon, M. (2003) *Education, Entertainment and Learning in the Home*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Callender, C. (2003) *Attitudes to Debt: school leavers and further education students' attitudes to debt and their impact on participation in higher education.* London: Universities UK.

Central Statistics Office (2015) *Survey on Income and Living Conditions: 2015 results*.
Accessible at: **https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditions2015/**

Centre for the Study of Higher Education (2008) *Participation and Equity: A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socio-economic backgrounds and indigenous people*. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.

Chesters, J. and Watson, L. (2013) 'Understanding the persistence of inequality in higher education: evidence from Australia', *Journal of Education Policy*, 28(2): 198–215.

Clancy, P. (2001) *College Entry in Focus: A Fourth National Survey of Access to Higher Education.*
Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Where both parents worked, the classification was based on the highest-ranking occupation.

Connor, H. and Dewson, S. (2001) *Social Class and Higher Education: issues affecting decisions on participation by lower social class groups.* London: Department for Education and Employment.

Cooke, R., Barkham, M., Audin, K. and Bradley, M. (2004) '*How social class differences affect students' experience of* university', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 28(4): 407–21.

Crossley, S. (2017) *In Their Place: The Imagined Geographies of Poverty*. London: Pluto.

Crozier, G., Reay, D., Clayton, J., Colliander, L. and Grinstead, J. (2008) 'Different strokes for different folks: diverse students in diverse institutions – experiences of higher education', *Research Papers in Education*, 23(2): 167–77.

Cullinan, J., Flannery, D., Walsh, S. and McCoy, S. (2013) 'Distance effects, social class and the decision to participate in higher education in Ireland', *The Economic and Social Review*, 44: 19–51.

Department of Education and Skills (2016) *Early Leavers – What Next?* Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2017) Education and Training Boards. Approved Allocation of Teaching Posts 2017/18 School Year. Circular 0012/2017.

Department of Education and Skills (2011) *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 – Report of the Strategy Group.* Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

Department of Education and Skills (2006) *Report a*nd *Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Justice and Equality (2017) *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy*, 2017–2021. Dublin: Department of Justice and Equality.

Department of Social Protection (2015) *Social Inclusion Monitor.* Dublin: Department of Social Protection.

Dukelow, F. and Considine, M. (2017) *Irish Social Policy: a critical introduction.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Evans, S. (2009) 'In a different place: working-class girls and higher education', *Sociology*, 43(2): 340-55.

Finnegan, F. and Merrill, B. (2017) '"We're as good as anybody else": a comparative study of working-class university students' experiences in England and Ireland', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(3): 307–24.

Fives, A., Kennan, D., Canavan, J., Brady, B. and Cairns, D. (2010) *Study of Young Carers in the Irish Population.* Dublin: Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

Forsyth, A. and Furlong, A. (2003) 'Access to higher education and disadvantaged young people', *British Educational Research Journal*, 29(2): 205–25.

García, S. and Guerra, P. (2004) 'Deconstructing deficit thinking: working with educators to create more equitable learning environments', *Education and Urban Society*, 36(2): 150–68.

Geldard, K. and Geldard, D. (2009) Counselling Adolescents: the proactive approach for young people. London: Sage.

Goldenberg, C. (2001) 'Cause or effect? A longitudinal study of immigrant Latino parents' aspirations and expectations, and their children's school performance', *American Educational Research Journal,* 38(3): 547–82.

HEAR (2017) 'What is HEAR?' Accessible at: **https://accesscollege.ie/hear/about-hear/what-is-hear/**

Higher Education Authority (2014) Consultation Paper: *Towards the Development of a New National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.*

Higher Education Authority (2017) *Key Facts and Figures*: Higher Education 2015/16. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Higher Education Authority (2008) *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008–2013.* Dublin: HEA.

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

Higher Education Authority (2017b) Student grant website.
http://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/student-grant/
Accessed 14 November 2017.

Higher Education Authority (2018) *A Study of Progression in Higher Education.* Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Hutchings, M. and Archer, L. (2001) '"Higher than Einstein": constructions of going to university among working-class non-participants', *Research Papers in Education,* 16(1): 69–91.

Institute of Guidance Counsellors (2016) 'DEIS takes the Brunt of Austerity Cuts to Guidance Counselling in Schools' **http://www.igc.ie/** Accessed November 2017.

Institute for Research on Higher Education (2016) *College Affordability Diagnosis: National Report.* Philadelphia, PA: Institute for Research on Higher Education, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania.

Irwin, S. and Elley, S. (2011) 'Concerted cultivation? Parenting values, education and class diversity', *Sociology,* 45(3): 480–95.

Irwin, S. and Elley, S. (2012) 'Parents' hopes and expectations for their children's future occupations', *The Sociological Review*, 61: 111–30.

James, R. (2002) *Socioeconomic Background and Higher Education Participation*: an analysis of school students' aspirations and expectations. Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training.

Kaufman, P. (2003) 'Learning to *not* labor: how working-class individuals construct middle-class identities', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 44(3): 481–504.

Keane, E. (2012) 'Differential prioritising: orientations to higher education and widening participation', *International Journal of Educational Research,* 53: 150–9.

Keane, E. (2011a) 'Dependence-deconstruction: widening participation and traditional-entry students transitioning from school to higher education in Ireland', *Teaching in Higher Education,* 16(6): 707–18.

Keane, E. (2011b) 'Distancing to Self-Protect: The Perpetuation of Inequality in Higher Education through Socio-Relational Dis/engagement', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 32(3): 449–66.

Keane, E. (2009) '"Frictional" relationships…tension in the camp: focusing on the relational in under-represented students' experiences in higher education', *Irish Educational Studies*, 28(1): 85–102.

Kelly, E. and McGuinness, S. (2015) 'Impact of the Great Recession on unemployed and NEET individuals' labour market transitions in Ireland', *Economic Systems.* Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.

Kettley, N.C. and Whitehead, J.M. (2012) 'Remapping the "landscape of choice": patterns of social class convergence in the psycho-social factors shaping the higher education choice process', *Educational Review*, 64(4): 493–510.

Kirk, C.M., Lewis-Moss, R.K., Nilsen, C. and Colvin, D.Q. (2011) 'The role of parent expectations on adolescent educational aspirations', *Educational Studies,* 37(1): 89–99.

Knipe, D., Montgomery, A. and Reynolds, M. (2005) T*raveller Children's Experiences in Mainstream Post-Primary Schools in Northern Ireland*: *A Qualitative Study*. Bangor: Department of Education, Northern Ireland.

Lareau, A. (2003) *Unequal Childhoods: class race and family life*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.

Leathwood, C. and O'Connell, P. (2003) '"It's a struggle": the construction of the "new student" in higher education', *Journal of Education Policy,* 18(6): 597–615.

Lehmann, W. (2007) '"I Just Didn't Feel Like I Fit in": The Role of Habitus in University Dropout Decisions', *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 37(2): 89–110.

Lynch, K. (2006) 'Neo-liberalism and marketisation: the implication for higher education', *European Education Research Journal,* 5(1): 1–17.

Lynch, K. and O'Riordan, C. (1998) 'Inequality in higher education: a study of class barriers', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19(4): 445–78.

Maunder, R. (2017) 'Students' peer relationships and their contribution to university adjustment: the need to belong in the university community', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 42(6): 756–68.

McCoy, S. and Byrne, D. (2011) '"The sooner the better I could get out of there": barriers to higher education access in Ireland', *Irish Educational Studies*, 30(2): 141–57.

McCoy, S., Byrne, D., O'Connell, P.J., Kelly, E. and Doherty, C. (2010) *Hidden Disadvantage? A study of the low participation in higher education by the non-manual group.* Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Meehan, C., and Howells, K. (2017) '"What Really Matters to Freshers?": Evaluation of First Year Student Experience of Transition into University', *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* 42(7): 893–907.

Mistry, R.S., White, E.S., Benner, A.D. and Huynh, V.W. (2009) 'A longitudinal study of the simultaneous influence of mothers' and teachers' educational expectations on low-income youth's academic achievement', *Journal of Youth Adolescence,* 38: 826–38.

NESDO (2013) *The Social Dimensions of the Crisis: The Evidence and its Implications.* Dublin: National Economic and Social Development Office.

O'Connell, C., Finnerty, J. and Egan, O. (2008) *Hidden Voices: An exploratory study of young carers in Cork,* Working Paper Series 08/07. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

O'Connell, P., Clancy, D. and McCoy, S. (2006) *Who Went to College in 2004? A National Survey of Entrants to Higher Education*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Padfield, P. and Cameron, G. (2009) 'Inclusive Education for Children and Young People with Interrupted Learning in Scotland' in P.A. Danaher, M Kenny and R Leder (eds), *Traveller, Nomadic and Migrant Education* 29–46. New York: Routledge.

Powell, F. (2017) *The Political Economy of the Irish Welfare State: church, state and capital.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Ramburuth, P. and Härtel, C. (2010) 'Understanding and meeting the needs of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds', *Multicultural Education & Technology Journal,* 4(3): 153–62.

Read, B., Archer, L. and Leathwood, C. (2003) 'Challenging cultures? Student conceptions of "belonging" and "isolation" at a Post-1992 University', *Studies in Higher Education,* 28(3): 261–77.

Reay, D. (2005) 'Doing the dirty work of social class? Mothers' work in support of their children's schooling', *Sociological Review,* 53(2): 104–16.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2010) '"Fitting in" or "standing out": working class students in UK higher education', *British Educational Research Journal,* 36(1): 107-24.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2009) '"Strangers in Paradise"? Working-class students in elite universities', *Sociology,* 43(6): 1103–21.

SCIE (2005) T*he Health and Well-being of Young Carers*, Briefing Paper. London: Social Care Institute for Excellence.

Scutter, S., Palmer, E., Luzeckyj, A., Burke da Silva, K. and Brinkworth, R. (2011) 'What do commencing undergraduate students expect from first year university?', *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education,* 2(1): 8–20.

Slater, T. (2017) 'Territorial stigmatization: symbolic defamation and the contemporary metropolis' in J. Hannigan and G. Richards (eds), *The Sage Handbook of New Urban Studies.* London: Sage.

Smyth, E. (2009) 'Buying your way into college? Private tuition and the transition to higher education in Ireland', *Oxford Review of Education,* 35(1): 1–22.

Smyth, E. and Banks, J. (2012) '"There was never really any question of anything else": young people's agency, institutional habitus and the transition to higher education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 33(2): 263–81.

Smyth, E. and Hannan, D.F. (2000) 'Education and Inequality' in B. Nolan, P.J. O'Connell and C.T. Whelan (eds.) *Bust to Boom? The Irish Experience of Growth and Inequality.* Dublin: IPA.

Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013) *Higher Education: the Fair Access Challenge.* London: Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission.

Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat: the new dangerous class.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Stuart, K., Maynard, L. and Rouncefield, C. (2015) *Evaluating practice for projects with young people – a guide to creative research.* London: Sage.

Thomas, L. (2002) 'Student Retention in Higher Education: The Role of Institutional Habitus' *Journal of Education Policy,* 17(4): 423–42. DOI: 10.1080/02680930210140257.

Tinto, V. (1993) *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition,* 2nd edn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Uitto, M., Lutovac, S., Jokikokko, K. and Kaasila, R. (2018) 'Recalling life-changing teachers: positive memories of teacher-student relationships and the emotions involved', *International Journal of Educational Research,* 87: 47–56.

Wacquant, L., Slater, T. and Pereira, V.B. (2014) 'Territorial Stigmatization in Action', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space,* 46: 1270–80.

Watson, D., Kenny, O. and McGinnity, F. (2017) *A Social Portrait of Travellers in Ireland.* Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.

Weller, S. (2012) 'Evolving creativity in qualitative longitudinal research with children and teenagers', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology,* 15(2): 119–33.

Wilcox, P., Winn, S. and Fyvie Gauld, M. (2005) '"It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people": the role of social support in the first year experience of higher education', *Studies in Higher Education,* 30: 6, 707–22.

Wilks, J. and Wilson, K. (2012) 'Going on to uni? Access and participation in university for students from backgrounds of disadvantage', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management,* 32(1): 79–90.

Yorke, M. and Thomas, L. (2003) 'Improving the Retention of Students from Lower Socio-economic Groups', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management,* 25(1): 63–74.

APPENDIX

PARTICIPANTS PROFILE: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE AND PARENTS' EDUCATION

Survey participants were asked about the employment status of their parents and (if applicable) their parents' occupation. Seventy per cent of participants (n=213) indicated that one or both of their parents worked outside of the home.[5] The socio-economic profile was as follows: employers and managers (10%); higher and lower professional (10%); non-manual (29%); manual (skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled, 30%); farmer (5%); all other occupied and unknown (5%); no response (12%). Non-manual was the largest single grouping (29%) and higher professional was the smallest (2%, n=5, all deriving from the rural schools). Significantly, the non-manual group has one of the lowest rates of participation in higher education (see McCoy and Byrne, 2011; McCoy et al., 2010).

Survey participants were also asked to indicate their parents' highest level of education, indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Parents' Highest Level of Education

Highest Level of Education	MOTHER %	FATHER %
Primary school	3	5
Some secondary school (Junior Cert. level)	27	25
Finished secondary school (Leaving Certificate)	18	10
Apprenticeship or trade qualification	1	11
Other courses & training after leaving school	17	10
Degree (from a university or institute of technology)	14	10
Don't know	8	16
Other	2	1
No response	10	13
TOTAL	**100%**	**100%**

[5]Where both parents worked, the classification was based on the highest-ranking occupation.

PROFILE OF STUDENTS IN CASE-STUDY SCHOOLS

Of the 272 survey participants who provided information on gender, 47% were male and 53% female. As can be seen from Table 2 below, the vast majority of students were 'white Irish'.

Table 2: Student Profile

	%
White Irish	79
White Irish Traveller	2
Any other white background	4
Black Irish	<1
Black African	<1
Asian Irish	<1
Any other Asian background	<1
No response	12
TOTAL	**100%**




UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh


IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn