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Title	Address by Áine Hyland, Professor of Education, University College Cork, at the HEEU Conference on Rural Issues in Higher Education
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Publication date	2001-11-22;2001-11-22
Original Citation	Hyland, Á. (2002) 'Address by Áine Hyland, Professor of Education, University College Cork, at the HEEU Conference on Rural Issues in Higher Education', in O'Connell, A. (ed.) Rural issues in higher education: Proceedings of conference held in Tipperary Institute 22nd and 23rd November 2001. Cork: Higher Education Equality Unit.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
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Download date	2026-11-04 20:39:21
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17165



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Address by Áine Hyland, Professor of Education, University College Cork, at the HEEU Conference on Rural Issues in Higher Education

Tipperary Institute, November 22nd 2001

Thank you for inviting me to contribute to this conference on rural issues in Higher Education. This is an important and neglected topic and I would like to compliment the HEEU for putting it on the agenda. Data on access to, participation in and benefit from higher education by students from rural backgrounds in Ireland is scarce and there is little published information from an Irish perspective on the matter. As with so many other neglected issues, the HEEU is breaking new ground in addressing this issue and I look forward to hearing from other conference speakers on this topic.

In the early 1960s, when the Investment in Education survey was carried out, I was a young research assistant involved in collecting data on the extent of participation by the 15 to 19 year old population in full-time second level education in urban and rural areas. Table 6.30 of the Investment in Education report (published in 1965) showed that in 1961, participation by females in second level education was higher than participation by males. Whereas 35% of 15 to 19 year old females in rural areas were enrolled in second level schools, the comparable figure for males at that time was less than 21%. The converse was true in urban areas, where 27% of males of that age group were enrolled in full-time education as against 22% of females. The reasons were fairly obvious. Rural males were actively involved in farming activities and urban females could get employment in industries and services, but there was very little paid employment available locally for rural females and they tended to stay on in full-time education longer than their male peers. Another contributing factor in many parts of the country was the relative scarcity of boys' secondary schools compared to girls' secondary schools in rural areas and small towns. Whereas religious orders and congregations of nuns proliferated throughout Ireland, there were many dioceses where the Bishops historically had discouraged religious Brothers from setting up schools - particularly in the northern and northwestern dioceses. This meant that many thousands of boys throughout the country were not within commuting distance of a secondary schools and could only benefit from such schooling if they could afford to pay boarding fees or if they were willing to travel long distances. And travel long distances they did! Table 10.4. of the Investment in Education report showed that in 1962/3, 15% of boys attending secondary school in the three counties of Ulster (Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan) travelled more than 10 miles each way to school every day. It would seem that the majority of them travelled by bicycle because those were the days before free second level education, free transport and the yellow buses!

The findings of the Investment in Education Report, contributed to the decision of Government to introduce free education at second-level in Ireland in 1967. The year prior to the introduction of free education and free transport was a hectic year for civil servants in the Department of Education in Marlborough St. On large Ordnance

Survey maps, the country was divided into school catchment areas. Urban and rural district electoral divisions were marked, and each second level school was allocated its ration of "feeder" national schools. Inevitably, there were controversial allocations and politicians became involved in arguing the case for their constituents - some of whom they regarded as being allocated to inappropriate catchment areas.

It is interesting that the issue of rural access to higher education has never been on the political agenda to the same extent as access or lack of access to second level education was at that time. I also find it curious that since the 1960s, the amount of research on participation by the rural population in second or third level education has been limited. Successive reports on third level participation by Patrick Clancy since the early 1980s provide data on participation in third level education by county, gender, social class and parental occupation. Some information on participation by the rural population in third level education can be gleaned by analysing the participation rates of the children of the farming community in third level education. In 1980, the estimated percentage of an age cohort entering full-time higher education from the socio-economic group designated as "farmers" was 30%. By 1998, this percentage had increased to 75%. The proportion entering higher education from a farming background (75%) compares favourably with the proportion of young people from a salaried employee background (55%) or a lower professional background (48%). Whereas the participation of young people from a farming background had increased by a factor of 150% in the period between 1980 and 1998, the participation of young people from a lower professional background had increased by only 50% (from 33% to 48%).

While school leavers from rural areas do not appear to be disadvantaged in terms of participating in third level education relative to their urban peers, other rural groups encounter identifiable difficulties in accessing and participating in third level education. Looking at the audience here today, I see a lot of mature women, and for this group in particular, current government initiatives do not go far enough to enable them to participate in and benefit from higher education. Many of these women, like myself, coming from a rural second level school in Ireland in the 1950s or 1960s, were not encouraged to go to University. The marriage ban was in operation in most workplaces until the early 1970s, including the Civil Service, the Bank, the teaching profession (until 1959), nursing etc. It was deemed by many families to be a waste of time and money for their daughter to waste three or four years in University (unless her purpose was to find a husband - but it was an expensive way of finding a husband!). Most young women, regardless of how well they had achieved academically in the Leaving Certificate, went into a short-term job, to tide them over until Mr. Right came along - hopefully within five or six years. For many such women, University education would have a great attraction a decade or two later when their children were becoming independent and / or leaving home.

But there were and continue to be many obstacles which prevent such women from benefiting from higher education - obstacles which have not yet been removed. For rural women, distance has to be a relevant factor. A rural woman with family and caring responsibilities is not as mobile as a school leaver - she cannot move home to live near the third level institution of her choice. She may not even be within daily travelling distance of a third level institution - even if she has transport. Higher education institutions operate on the assumption that their students are unencumbered

by family or caring responsibilities. They tend to operate on a nine to five basis, and their offices and support services reflect this. While library hours are somewhat more extended, they are not as flexible as students with family responsibilities would wish. Creche facilities are limited and issues like parking shortages become a major obstacle when children and other dependants have to be collected at odd hours of the day. Regulations relating to examinations and to progression are usually based on the assumption that students will complete all modules within the specified timescale and no Irish university has yet adopted the flexible credit accumulation system which is common in many other western countries.

Fee remission applies only to full-time students as also do maintenance and travel grants. One might well ask why a government which purports to support lifelong learning and flexible structures has not yet addressed the issue of levelling the playing field for part-time students. The decision by the government in the mid nineteen nineties to abolish fees for all full-time third-level students, regardless of income, only benefits those who can afford and manage to study full-time. It does not begin to address the needs of those, who for various reasons, are not free to do this.

The National Development Plan calls for 'facilitating the development of a system of lifelong learning'. A lifelong learning framework has implications for all levels of education - from the cradle to the grave. To enable our students to benefit from lifelong learning structures, the structures themselves need to be flexible and to adapt to the needs of the users. New information and communication technologies have the potential to revolutionise the learning environment, but educational institutions in this country are only beginning to develop this potential, and the Tipperary Institute is at the cutting edge in this regard. Our focus as educators needs to change from teaching to learning - we need to facilitate and encourage learning, not merely impart information. The growth of knowledge in recent decades is exponential - no teacher can possibly know everything that his/her students will need to know. Teachers have to help their students to become effective knowledge seekers, to develop learning skills, a sense of curiosity and a love of learning.

Promoting social inclusion is a major plank of Ireland's National Development Plan 2001 - 2006. The Green Paper on Education in 1992 defined educational disadvantage as "barriers to participation which militate against those from disadvantaged backgrounds resulting in a complex set of factors which influence the extent to which young people and adults participate in education". It is important to recognise the complexity of those factors. They are social, economic, cultural, geographical, and they are also expectational, as your Director, Padraig Culbert outlined already. He talked about the incredulity with which the ambitions of some rural women are met when they declare their intention of enrolling on a higher education course. The limited traditions and expectations of family, friends and neighbours can be difficult to overcome. The cultural expectation of many rural families is that a woman's place is in the home. This expectation comes from our 1937 Constitution - (in Article 41.2 the State recognises that "by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved") - and will not easily be displaced.

As already mentioned, government policy as articulated in a number of recent reports, encourages the participation of mature students in third level education, even if fee and

other support structures do not yet support this policy. Concerns that mature students might somehow be second-best or second-rate students are unfounded. Simply because some people were prevented or discouraged through circumstances from progressing to third level education when they completed second-level, that does not mean that when the opportunity arises at a later stage they don't have the capacity to benefit from it. The evidence shows that they can do very well - even in a situation where third level structures and supports are still far from ideal from a mature student's point of view. In this regard, the achievements of mature students in the Faculty of Arts in UCC over the past decade or so is very encouraging. While non-completion rates of mature students are a little higher than overall non-completion rate, over 70% of those who complete a degree course achieve an honours degree, a rate that is consistently higher than the school-leaver rate. A high proportion of mature students continue on to post-graduate study and many do very well. The evidence is unambiguous that second chance mature students can be and are high academic achievers.

In this country as we enter the 21st century, almost 20% of our young people do not complete second-level education annually. This issue has to be a priority during the decades ahead. Ireland has made great strides in developing a knowledge-based economy. The country has benefited from this but for those who did not have a chance in the earlier years, and for those whom the system is currently failing, we have to redress the imbalance.

According to a major study on educational disadvantage carried out four years ago by Dr. Tom Kellaghan of the Educational Research Centre in Drumcondra in co-operation with Combat Poverty and the Department of Education, 60% of children in primary schools who were from a disadvantaged background were from a rural area. And yet, at that time, most of the government funded educational initiatives for disadvantage were focused on urban disadvantage. Things have changed somewhat since then and some of the more recent government initiatives for educational disadvantage include rural pupils. However, we still have a long way to go.

We are all aware that the costs of educational failure for the individual, for the economy and for society are very serious, and there has to be urgent attention to this from government. Not alone is this a moral imperative, the economic imperative is unquestionable. Against the cost of correcting educational failure has to be set the price society eventually pays for its effects in terms of social welfare and health costs, as well as in the social and general welfare costs of effectively creating an unemployed urban and rural underclass. Recent statistics show that the government spends £15,200 on a child during his / her eight years in primary school. By the end of junior cycle (second level) that investment has grown to £21,000. By the time a young person has completed a four year university course, government investment will have grown to £48,600. However, one year in prison can cost up to £70,000 so money spent in reducing or minimising the risk of crime is money well spent.

Rural disadvantage has to be kept on the agenda. We have lost sight of it partly because of the visibility of urban disadvantage - street violence in city centres is more visible than rural violence, as are drug problems, and crime levels. The immediate consequences for urban society are perhaps more visible to urban-based policy makers

who may as a result be more likely to focus on urban disadvantage than on rural disadvantage.

Tipperary Institute has set out to be an exception to the traditional model of Irish third level of education. It is committed to making full use of the new technologies to provide for flexibility in the delivery of courses. Its superbly equipped distance learning suites and computer based learning facilities are the envy of third level institutions which are not yet equipped to this level of sophistication. It is very important that all involved - staff and students - use this technology to its full potential. It is also important that the Institute document its successes and failures in the years ahead, particularly in relation to distance learning, and share its experience with longer-founded third level institutions. The Institute is an example of an innovative and responsive model of third level education and other institutions can and should learn from its example and experiences.