A Critical Exploration of the Rhetoric of Equity Belied by Practice in Postgraduate Teacher Education

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A critical exploration of the rhetoric of equity belied by practice in postgraduate teacher education

Roisin Donnelly

Abstract

This paper presents the initial results of an investigation into the current awareness and perceptions of equity issues amongst academic staff working on a postgraduate learning and teaching course for teachers in tertiary education in the Republic of Ireland. The study is set in the contemporary landscape of discourses around equality, egalitarianism and equity in education generally. The Irish White Paper on Adult Education *Learning for Life* (2000) recommends that adult education should be underpinned by three core principles, one of which is to promote equality of access, participation and outcome for participants in adult education, with pro-active strategies to counteract barriers arising from differences of socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and disability. However, there is no detailing of specific research conducted on equality issues on Postgraduate Certificate Courses for teachers in tertiary level education and how staff working on such courses conceptualise their own practice within current, sometimes conflicting discourses. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to uncover whether the rhetoric of equity in an Irish higher education institution is being put into practice in reality by the academic course team specifically on this particular course and more widely within the institution in which the course is being delivered, and to critically examine the implications for policy. A qualitative questionnaire was distributed to the course team who designed and are delivering the particular course under study to gauge their awareness of, and attitudes towards, equity in higher education and their experiences of it. Findings included issues with regards to equality of access, participation, outcome and esteem.

Introduction

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Through conducting small-scale qualitative research, in the form of a questionnaire, the primary aim of this research is to discover what the course team on the Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching are actually experiencing in terms of equity issues. By exploring what current, relevant literature is saying, a secondary aim is to inquire into the philosophical, legal and political positions with regard to equity in this third level educational institution in Ireland. The literature examined indicated the perspectives of stakeholders and policy-makers in higher education teacher training. Within a philosophical and policy framework, this study proposed to weigh up the implications of the data within the DIT Centre for Learning and Teaching, and within the institution in which the centre is located. Figure 1 shows the interrelationships between the issues explored in this paper.
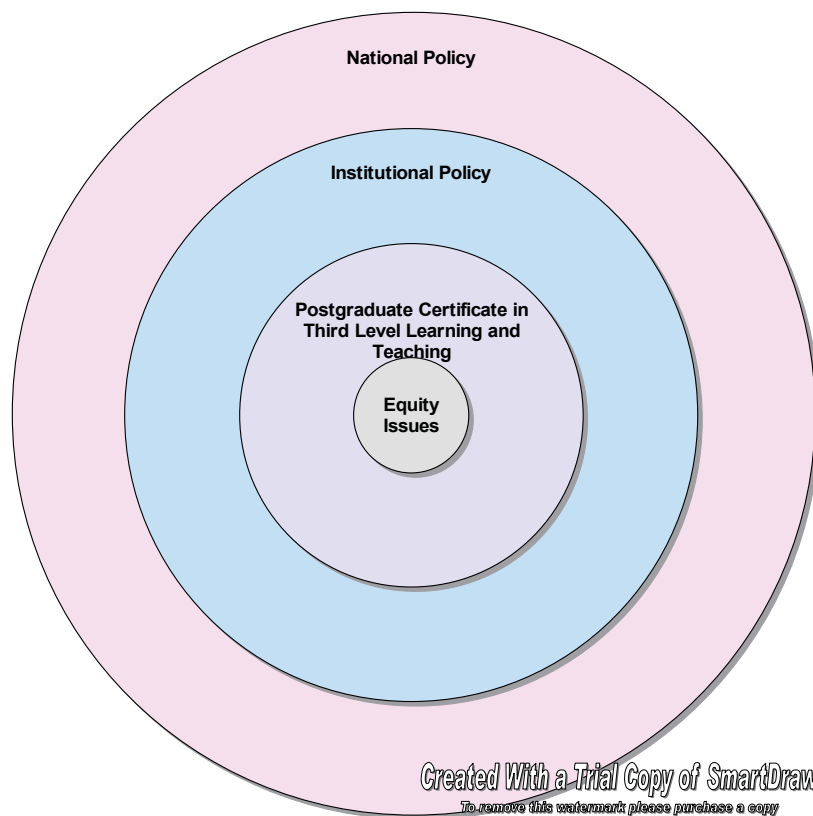

Figure 1: Interrelationships of equity explored in third level learning and teaching

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The structure of this work was influenced in part by a study conducted in the area of Teacher Education in Northern Ireland, which explored similar issues (Elwood *et al.*, 2003). My micro-study attempted to investigate the highlighted themes further and to gauge the extent of cognizance and prioritisation of equity issues in third level learning and teaching amongst the providers of education on our Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching. A triangle of evidence was used in this study to investigate specific areas in relation to the content, delivery and resources for the course.

Context of study

The research outlined in this paper emerges from a postgraduate teacher training course, the Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching, the first such course designed specifically for lecturers in the sector in the Republic of Ireland. In essence, it is a critical investigation of equity issues explored within the course. The Centre supports the learning, teaching and assessment activities, including integrating learning technologies, of all academic staff in this institution. It supports a wide group of academic staff from the areas of apprentice, undergraduate and postgraduate education. In this study, the terms 'student' and 'participant' are used interchangeably as the students on our course are themselves simultaneously 'students' and 'lecturers'.

As higher education potentially has the control of the legitimation and elaboration of new forms of knowledge and pedagogical styles (Lynch 1999), the practical academic support provided to these lecturers is supplemented by increasing awareness of current national and international research and strategies related to third level learning and teaching. The goal of the Centre is to offer resources, consultation, and a forum for discussion and reflection to help lecturers in turn provide a valuable learning experience to all the Institute's students. A substantial part of this remit as a course team is to have a full awareness of equity issues in the context of higher education, and based on that, provide relevant support for academic staff in the Institute on equity issues. Indeed, one of the specific learning outcomes stated for this course is to show increased awareness and understanding of equity issues affecting third level learning and teaching; this is to be

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achieved by the course participants through the assessable end product for the course, writing an equity case study for a Teaching Portfolio. Within the academic tutors' discourse that surrounds this course, an analysis of equality issues for the course participants within this educational institution was felt to be fundamental. For these reasons alone, it is envisaged that this research will have implications for the future thrust and development of the course.

Literature review

For the purposes of establishing a clearer picture of the rhetoric and practice of equity in Irish higher education, a critical review of the literature was necessary. As Skilbeck (2000: 12) suggested 'there is no single, royal road. Decisions can be informed by international experience but not determined by it'.

The terms 'equity' and 'equality' are at times used interchangeably in this study, but are only used in relation to the context in which they are presented in the literature. Equity in the more generic sense was critically explored at institutional and national levels. This stance was adopted deliberately for this research, rather than exploring one specific equity issue in depth, as it is more suitable for the context of the course.

To assist in informing the design of the qualitative questionnaire used in his study, I found it extremely beneficial to review the relevant equity literature to explore some of the issues uncovered for academic staff in this course in third level learning and teaching. Albeit, broad in its discussion, I feel this literature is important for the context of this study because it gives a picture of the current debates on equity within Irish higher education.

Baker's (1998) identification of three basic conceptions of equality in contemporary egalitarian theory is a useful starting point. The idea that all human beings are equal in dignity and worth, and are therefore equally worthy of concern and respect gives some recognition to the idea that all human beings have basic needs. Liberal equality, being most commonly associated with the principle of equality of opportunity, proposes that

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equality policies should be directed towards equalising opportunities for various types of mobility, including educational, within a stratified system. Radical egalitarians focus on the elimination of major structural inequalities in the first place.

Conducting this current research in third level learning and teaching, I find myself, not too surprisingly, essentially falling into the liberal egalitarian camp, and hoping to use this research as a mechanism to increase the current opportunities for all present and future course participants. I agree with Lynch (1999) when she states that there is no denial that education is essentially about the realisation of change in terms of some predefined sense of an 'educational good'. Clancy *et al.* (1995) outline evidence that points to the centrality of education in Irish life as it is perceived as having a crucial role to play in the continuing modernisation of Irish society. They argue that it can be an important instrument in the achievement of personal emancipation and greater equality, but at the same time they are aware that there is no utopian view of the possibilities of education with regard to equality.

As Lynch (1999) has concluded, it is not surprising that there is great diversity in the way in which equality has been interpreted and defined over the last quarter century; after all, there has been a wide scope of disparate traditions undertaking research in this area. The dominant thinking in the area in this timeframe has been liberalism's focus on adjustment and modification of practice, rather than any radical reform. However, despite its complexity, she suggests that there is a relative universality of 'equality' as a public value. However, Baker (1998) argues that on the face of it, equality is just another of those principles which Irish society is happy to endorse on ceremonial occasions, as long as it does not impinge on real life. He posits that equality seems to be no more than a pious aspiration. This study hopes to address these issues and examine whether the rhetoric of equity in current third level learning and teaching is only partially being matched by practice, and to establish whether some fundamental problems remain.

Lynch goes on to argue that higher education can, and does, play a central role in formally articulating perspectives and visions of society. Generally, and for the purposes

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of this study, I would agree with this, yet I would be reluctant to completely adhere to her suggestion that it is crucial for academics interested in challenging dominant paradigms and perspectives to use higher education as a site of resistance. This is one route to change, but it is not the only one. The real issue lies in the type of change that is needed in order for institutions to adhere more fully to their equity policies.

One of the criticisms of the equity debate is that everything can become overly-categorised and that a lack of discourse can occur between relevant groups. Essentially, the various groups can be in pursuit of their own particular interests, and the common-good is neglected. This study is an attempt to begin a discourse on equity issues between the users and providers of third level learning and teaching within one institution, and ascertain whether this exchange can have an impact on relevant policy. Any changes in the way we think about equity issues require cooperation among groups previously separated and sometimes antagonistic to one another and thus, as Feinberg (1998) argues, they also require a commitment to a common authority that can override local interests, local decisions and local ways of knowing. It is clear from the fact that the course team endorse this research being carried out that they believe in their role in assisting with increasing cognizance and prioritisation of these important equity issues through the course.

Design of primary research

This study was always intended to be collaborative in nature, with joint theorising and joint action, agreeing with Palmer (1997: 54) that *'at its deepest reaches, knowing is always communal'*. From the outset it was considered important to continue to work in a shared space with fellow academics at the stage of refining the research area as there was a desire for this research to make an impact on the equity issues that we face as providers of this course.

Whilst recognising that the concept of 'empowerment' is popular in educational research, it perhaps has been ambiguously used. For the context of this study, it is through setting up a dialogical process to obtain other's perspectives on the concepts and practices of

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equity in third level learning and teaching, and working together to implement any identified action, that empowerment is giving a voice to those within the Institute who have traditionally been unheard. This is the collective approach adopted for the posing of the research question and the data collection. At the same time I acknowledge the point that Griffiths (1998) has made, that collaboration is difficult to do well, even though it may be a way of improving the justice of research. In a sense, this study will be an attempt at critical praxis through the development of a framework designed to foster critical thinking and assist staff with the integration of academic and practical experiences regarding equity issues at third level.

Ethics were an important issue during the design and implementation of the primary research, and an ethics statement and statement of informed consent were produced for the participants in the study. What constitutes an appropriate and legitimate focus for social inquiry is the phenomenological meaningfulness of lived experience – people's interpretations and sense-makings of their experiences in a given context (Greene 1994). It is argued that the understanding of meaning as the goal of interpretivist inquiry is not simply a matter of manipulation and control of data, but rather it is a question of introducing openness and dialogue to the situation being investigated.

The structured questionnaire was designed to provide a basis for analysis and elucidatory comment on this topic of enquiry by the academic tutors on the course. The degree of structure was decided in advance as there was a fairly short timeline for this study, and the questions needed to strike a balance between the agenda of including topics on equity deemed relevant for this study, and obtaining the participants' insights on their own understanding of equality and how they translate that into their practice.

The selection, design and implementation of this research method was based on practical need and situational responsiveness, rather than on the consonance of a set of methods with any particular philosophical paradigm. However, as an interpretivist study, it was important to authenticate the interpretations as empirically based representations of experiences and meanings, rather than as biased inquirer opinion. As the issue of validity

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of evidence can be difficult and complex (see Macintyre 2000), it was considered important to have a form of triangulation in place.

As a general rule, qualitative questionnaires are an appropriate research vehicle when the goal of the investigation is to gain an understanding of the 'why' behind an attitude or behaviour (Rubin and Rubin 1995). In the questionnaire, it was important to establish how the providers of the Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching understand equality. The questions that were composed to explore this were:

- Equality – what does it first bring to mind?
- Equality for whom?
- Explore specific notions of equality mentioned (basic, liberal, radical) (Baker 1998) and concepts of equality of access, participation, outcome, respect, condition (Lynch 1999).

The rhetoric was analysed under the following areas to see how well it held up in practice:

- What issues of equality are mentioned in the Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching? (Rhetoric)
- What are the issues in the Institution's Equality Policy? (Rhetoric)
- How have programme participants experienced the practice of equality in the Postgraduate Certificate, more widely in continuing professional development **in** the Institute? (Practice)
- What issues nationally/internationally have had an impact on provision? (Practice)
- What is the practice in your classrooms? (Practice)
- What constraints are present? (Practice)
- Evaluation of practice (Practice)

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Primary research findings

In relation to the possibility of the voice of the individual being lost in wider scale equity policy and legislation, my belief is reinforced that even though this work is small-scale, it is important to investigate the opinions of the course team. The steps of the process of concurrent analysis were conducted and involved data transformation from the raw state to a form that allowed them to be used constructively to include the voice of the individuals on the course team in this discussion on equity in third level learning and teaching.

Whilst open-ended survey questions have traditionally been regarded as problematic for analysis, in this case, coding an individual's answers to open-ended questions with their responses to fixed response survey questions allowed the text to be examined in relation to those other responses. Only if needed, can they be coded on and analysed in more detail. Such techniques can provide deeper understanding of the data through corroboration or elaboration of conclusions drawn from the analysis, or perhaps fresh insight as data are viewed in new ways.

There were three steps in the process of analysing the questionnaires in this study.

1. Data reduction

   This involved careful reading of the presented material to identify the main themes of the studied process and behaviour, and categorisation of the material.

2. Data organisation

   This involved assembling information around specific themes, categorising information in more specific terms and presenting the results in the form of text, and for all of the themes, in the form of a flowchart. See Figure 2 for the research analysis in this study. I followed this by multiple readings of the data therein for regular episodes of events, situational factors, circumstances, strategies, interactions and phases relating to the awareness and practice of equity in this third level learning and teaching course. The recurring regularities became the themes into which subsequent items were sorted.

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3. Interpretation

This involved making decisions and drawing conclusions related to the research question. There were a number of findings from this research, which are discussed below. They can be categorised as educational equity awareness, policy awareness, classroom practice, constraints on practice, and evaluation of practice.
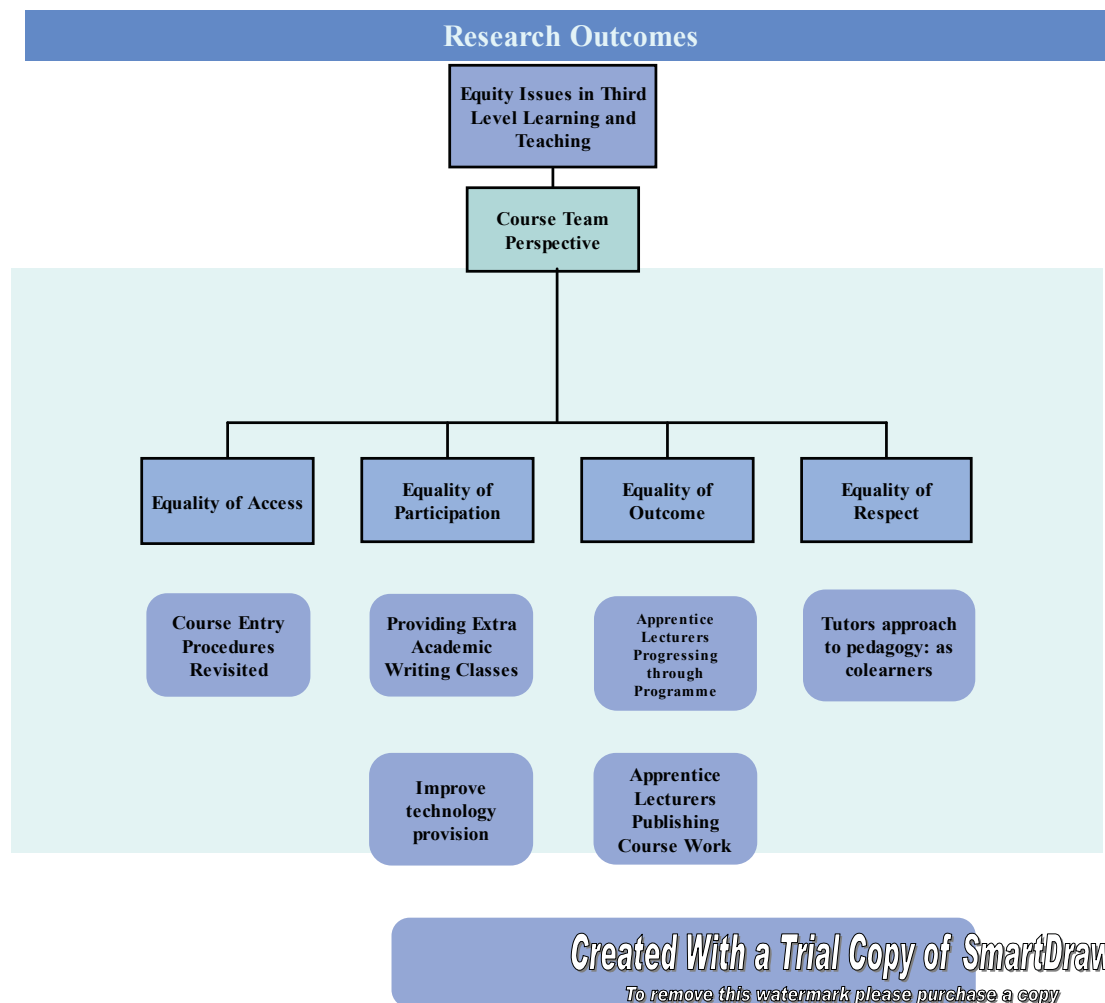

Figure 2: Research outcomes of equity explored in third level learning and teaching

Educational equity awareness

The tutors expressed an awareness of a number of key equity issues which needed to be addressed on the Postgraduate Programme. These included: people with disabilities;

travelers; people from ethnic minorities; civil rights; gender; sexual preference; age; disadvantaged backgrounds; learning difficulties; different cultures; provision of educational opportunity; equality of esteem and value of different types of education; and equality of provision and access.

When asked about equity within *classroom practice*, the course tutors identified a number of personal principles, as follows:

Personal beliefs: good, effective, creative learning and teaching per se is inclusive of all students; seeing the academic course team as co-learners; it is important to engender high educational aspiration amongst individuals; showing greater sensitivity to other ways of knowing and ways of being; reasonable accommodation, in terms of recommending specific types of books to a student; when working through pedagogic examples, using different contexts each time and having variety within the examples used so that more people feel included; group work research suggesting that excellent students gain by having to explain to average students; design of learning tasks to take into account differences; supporting participants to become comfortable with learning technologies.

Constraints on practice

There were certain constraints identified: institutional equal opportunities policy not being written in a rights perspective; much is still dependent on good will, not on a civil rights perspective, e.g. students with disabilities; physical learning environment is not accessible for people with disabilities; information technology access is not equal for all course participants; not all participants are allocated study time from their heads of department for independent study needed for the course; mostly attitudinal.

Discussion of research findings

There was an acknowledgement by the tutors that this questionnaire was designed to be reactive rather than revealing their considered knowledge of policy documents. Whilst thoroughly aware of the rhetoric present in institutional and national policy documents, the academic tutors from the course identified key equity issues currently being addressed on our course, and those that needed further redress in the near future.

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The work presented by Lynch (1999) was used as a general continuum to draw out implications for practice on the role of this higher education course in the promotion of equality. The first level explored was equality defined in terms of equalising access to this course within a stratified society and educational system. We have equality of access in the sense of being able to welcome applicants to the course who do not meet the stated entry requirements of an undergraduate degree; there has been an equivalent entry route to the course and in the past academic year we have set up an exceptional entry route. This now caters for those applicants who do not have a primary degree but have been lecturing in higher education for a number of years and have qualifications that are in line with the requirements to teach that particular subject discipline. A quote from the questionnaires illustrates that there are 'some anomalies created by notions of ''equivalence'' and a rather rigid notion about ''exceptional'' cases'.

The debate about access to higher education in Ireland has been linked to the debate about educational equality and socio-economic disadvantage. Research has shown that most of the discussion has centred on mechanisms for gaining entry to higher education institutions (see Murphy and Fleming 2000) – establishing access and foundation courses, increasing numbers of non-traditional entrants and generating modular and credit-based programmes. The findings from research undertaken at the National University of Ireland at both Maynooth and Dublin explored the experience of mature students returning to university. Findings indicate that questions of equality and disadvantage in the university are not only concerned with access, but also with accessibility – what happens to mature students when they arrive in college.

Similarly, this study corroborates that equal participation has been largely measured and interpreted in access terms. Indeed, two quotes from the questionnaires exemplifies this point.

> Widening access, setting people up for success that we let into the course through the supports we put in place for them. Equality of access is meaningless unless you have equality of participation and outcome.

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> In my practice I would seek to ensure that students would not just be accepted onto courses but also supported to progress through the courses. Participation in courses can be granted but extra supports might need to be put into place for students from different educational backgrounds.

Equality of participation is assessed, not so much in terms of the quality of educational experience available to students, but rather in terms of movement up to a given stage of the educational ladder. 'We strive towards equality of participation and have provided extra encouragement and tutorials to individuals.'

Studies which focus on levels of performance highlight the fact that equalising formal rights to education, or proportionate patterns of participation, does not equate with equal rates of success or outcomes. On this course, as revealed in the bi-annual participant assessments and evaluations, some participants without a primary degree have difficulties with the assessment of the course, namely, the previously mentioned Teaching Portfolio. However, a significant number of participants (44 per cent) who entered the course without a primary degree have progressed onto the Postgraduate Diploma and Masters in Third Level Learning and Teaching – which are the next phases of the programme.

However, regardless of individual mobility outcomes, inequality of respect can occur for all social groups, either by denying their identity in curricular selection and organisation, or by adopting authoritarian forms of pedagogical relations which can define learners as passive recipients of knowledge. Lynch (1999) posits that this situation contradicts other egalitarian messages which may be given through the formal curriculum itself. The work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) sheds interesting light on this concept, in that the absence of dialogue in pedagogic practice presents learning as a top-down rather than a partnership process. In this way we could be reinforcing a hierarchy which is anathema to the principle of equality itself.

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A further quote from one of the tutors reveals a deliberate approach taken by the course team to avoid a top-down pedagogic style on the course. [In place we have put] 'Support for group work, group projects, group assessment'.

To move beyond the question of distribution of education is to cross into the realms of radical egalitarianism. Equality of condition refers to an ideal state where all privileges and resources are distributed equally according to need. This is beyond the scope of this course and this study.

Pedagogic and policy implications of the rhetoric of equity belied by practice

This section of the study will explore why these problems have originated and how they might be challenged effectively. Areas that were identified as needing further redress on our course were providing further academic support for those lecturers who had not completed a traditional undergraduate degree, and who may be less familiar with the conventions of academic writing in the humanities at postgraduate level, and looking at widening participation in our courses in the area of technology access.

At a policy level, there was one main aspect that needed further work: it was felt that there was a lack of alignment between awareness-raising of equity issues and the reality of the classroom and staff room at the institution. There is an under-appreciation of this as it relates to third level teacher's learning and their own practice within classrooms. Up until now, there had been differential exposure to equality as an issue in third level learning and teaching, and this ensured an imbalance, and a continued lack of understanding of the impact of equality on third level teachers' own practice and professional development. It is agreed amongst the course tutors that it is important to look at what is happening in teaching practice around the institution, and explore what is effective learning and teaching practice regarding equity at third level.

The research from the questionnaires has also indicated that tutors would like to increase exposure to this issue, along with wider equity issues, in both the Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching, and in promoting continuing professional

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development generally within the institute. It is clear that there are a number of areas that need substantial further work. This has been an honest reflection by the tutors upon issues of equity within the course. We have been attempting to keep equity as one of the central themes within the course, but there is certainly more that can be done.

Equality of respect in terms of restructuring curricula and pedagogical relations is a logical possibility within this course and within the Learning and Teaching Centre without a radical redistribution of power outside of this. This is about movement from concern with equalising quantities of education attained to concern for equality as quality of experience in education.

From the outset, the focus of this paper has been on exploring the attitudes of the academic course team on relevant equity issues involved in the design and delivery of the Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching. As one of these tutors, it is important to state that the work is delimited in the following ways. The current data collected is from the tutor's perspective; the timescale for the study did not allow the collection of the course participants' views; this work is not establishing the views of all academic staff in the institution, as it is simply an interface between the Postgraduate Certificate and the current Equal Opportunity Policy of the institution. Future research can be conducted to explore the key issues revealed here in much more depth.

For educational development staff, such as ourselves, a major question then remains: When one is looking at changing the curriculum to incorporate equity, how far does one go to recognise and embed equity issues within the third level education curriculum whilst striking a balance with the exploration of other important pedagogic issues? There are similar issues in the challenge of embedding technology into the curriculum; it is more effective to do so consciously and in a planned, systematic way.

Lynch points out an important issue of dealing with equality within pedagogy in schools that I believe also could be applied to higher education:

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> if schools are not participatory democracies in their organisation, and
> dialogical in their pedagogical practice, then it is likely that equality goals
> pursued through the curricula will be self-defeating, as the hidden
> curriculum of schooling will contradict the message of the formal
> curriculum, and students are subjected more systematically and consistently
> to the equality message (or the inequality message) of the former rather than
> the latter.
>
> (Lynch 1999: 303)

The challenge for us as tutors supporting academic staff at third level is to try to ensure that effective learning and teaching takes place for these lecturers so that their students are able to receive a broad-based education, with the opportunities to follow up specific interests and activities, without students' progress and choices being unjustifiably constrained. The greater emphasis now evident in the legislature and resulting policies regarding equity in Irish Higher Education demonstrates that much more effort has been taken to improve practices in this respect, although it may take more time to further see its impact in specific third level subject disciplines and contexts.

There is no doubt that at specific levels in the Irish Higher Education sector, the rhetoric of equity is being attributed importance in policy. For example, in recent years, the President of Ireland made a speech recognising that access to third level education is a much discussed problem area but the transformed fortunes of many Irish people in recent years require education 'to keep on widening its embrace so that none of our people remain on those margins where talent is overlooked and wasted, but all get a chance to live fulfilled lives right at the centre' (McAleese 2003: para 4).

However, in practice, this on-the-ground research study suggests that specific equity issues are not getting the full backing they deserve to enable them to make an impact on teaching practice in specific subject disciplines and contexts. Certainly, the efforts being made at institutional level in higher education to address specific equity issues are limited by factors outside the institution, which have a powerful impact on students' attitudes and

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staff's ambition in career progression. One danger with efforts to promote equal opportunities is that they can raise aspirations and extend perceived choice, only for individuals to find that these higher goals are difficult to achieve.

Conclusion

Equal opportunities is in part to do with helping students to develop options and choices, whilst leaving it up to them in the final analysis to choose which ones to pursue. What is undesirable is for individuals to have choices only within an unnecessarily narrow range. Education is nothing if it is not about widening horizons and choice.

Although advancements have been made, obstacles still exist. Although a general strategy is planned by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), it appears that it will take time. The Chairperson of the HEA, summarised the state-of-play:

> Achieving equality in higher education has many of the features of a long and difficult campaign. Structural change in education invariably takes a long time. Wider society, its attitudes and structures, have enormous bearing on the capacity of third level institutions to achieve equality in their activities.
>
> (Thornhill 2003: para 3)

There is clearly room for further development of many of the issues highlighted in this initial investigation.

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